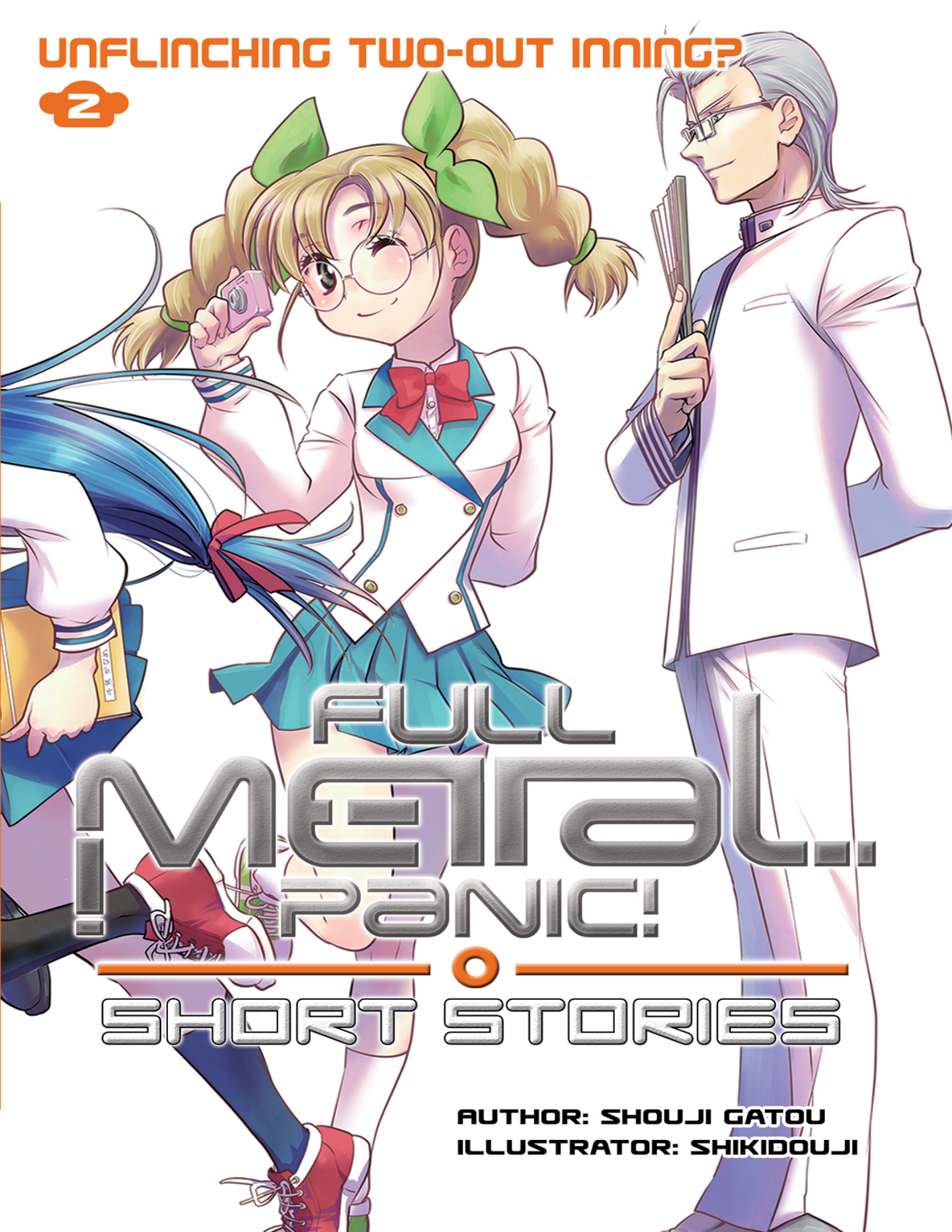
UNFLINCHING TWO-OUT INNING?

2



FULL METAL PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

UNFLINCHING TWO-OUT INNING?

2

FULL METAL PANIC!

SHORT STORIES

AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

Table of Contents

Cover

A Hostage of No Compromise

A Lunchtime of Wasted Effort

Lethal Weapon of Blasphemy

The War Cry of Overkill

Single-Minded Strikeout

Captain Amigo and Golden Days

Afterword

Color Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Download all your Fav Light Novels from Just Light Novels

A Hostage of No Compromise

A man in black clothing appeared in the door of the dark warehouse, holding a rifle in one hand.

The realization came to Sagara Sousuke: *The enemy's gun is trained on me.* He quickly returned fire with his pistol. Three rapid shots rang out. Blood burst from the man's chest and head as he dropped his gun and expired.

Hot on his heels, a man with a machine gun appeared from behind one of the drum canisters that lined the walls. Sousuke fired another three-shot burst. The enemy writhed in agony as he expired.

Another man with a rifle appeared. Sousuke pointed his gun at the new enemy, and...

"Reload," came a voice. He pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. And as he stood there, helpless and in shock, the enemy's rifle triggered a burst of fire.

Sousuke began to panic.

"Reload," the voice demanded.

His view was stained in red. *But I'm not through yet*, Sousuke thought. *This wound isn't fatal. More enemies are on the way. I have to defeat them all quickly!*

"Reload," the voice intoned a third time.

This gun won't do the job, Sousuke told himself. Then he cast aside the worthless blue plastic pistol and drew his beloved 9mm automatic from the holster on his back. With blinding swiftness, he pointed it at the enemy, and...

"Die," Sousuke commanded.

"Relo—"

Blam! Blamblamblamblamblam! Bursts of flame and sounds of gunfire. Lead slugs impaled the men in black on the screen.

The other patrons stopped what they were doing and turned dumbfounded gazes towards the corner of the arcade. A boy in a high-

collared school uniform with a pistol in his hands stood before the screen, which was now sparking and full of holes. Behind him stood a girl, approximately the same age, who was cradling her head in frustration.

Apparently the shooting game's case was still working, because the voice on the speakers kept repeating: "Reload... Reload... Reload..."

Sousuke casually holstered his gun, then turned back to the girl who'd been watching him play, Chidori Kaname. "It's a well-made simulator," he remarked. "It was so evocative of live combat that I was forced to engage with it seriously."

Kaname released a long sigh. "I guess it would be... Stupid me, encouraging you because I thought it would be funny..."

The game's speaker then proclaimed, in a stern voice, "Game over."

In the arcade's back office, they got an earful from the manager, who forced them to write down their home addresses and which school they attended. Following a stern lecture about the behavior of a model gamer, they were then given keychains (for some reason), and released.

"Guess we're never going back there, huh?" Kaname said as they made their way out. "Too bad. They have the easiest UFO-catchers in town..." She was rather tall for a girl in her later teens, with looks that usually belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine—though, exhausted by the long lecture as she was, the best she could do now would be a foldout ad in a newspaper. She walked through the crowded arcade, her long black hair swaying behind her.

Sousuke wordlessly followed after her. He had disheveled hair and sharp eyes, a sullen expression and tight frown. He carried a quiet tension all throughout his body.

"I told you about this!" she continued, having to shout to be heard over the arcade machines around her. "You've gotta point the muzzle off-screen and pull the trigger to reload!"

"It's dangerous to point your gun at anything you don't intend to hit; more so to pull the trigger," Sousuke argued back. "What if it really was still loaded?"

"It *wouldn't* be! It's just a light gun!"

Sousuke's eyes glinted. "A light gun," he mused. "I've read about those in *Jane's Fighting Ships*: free-electron lasers that can even destroy spy

satellites in orbit. Developed as part of President Reagan's Super Trooper plan in the 1980s—"

"Shut *up*!" Sousuke had been raised overseas in war-torn regions, and Kaname was finally starting to realize how fruitless it was to try to explain basic things to him, so she cut him off there. "Honestly... I am never taking you to an arcade again!"

"Hmm..." Sousuke grumbled as they passed the shooting game machine (which now had an "out of service" sign hanging from it), and left the arcade behind. And then...

"Hoi. Give us a minute, eh?" A small group of young men came to surround Sousuke and Kaname.

She immediately recognized them as fellow students at Jindai High. "Hey, it's those molester perv punks who tried to assault me!" she shouted, pointing.

"Who're you callin' 'molester perv punks'?!"

"Fine," she suggested, "'the sexual assault delinquency alliance'?"

"Don't call us that either!"

"'The misbehaving crotch group'?"

"The hell's that even mean?!" The man with the shaved head, who looked to be their leader, took a step forward.

"Wh-What, you wanna fight?" Kaname raised her bag in preparation.

But contrary to expectations, the skinhead just said, "Shaddap. It ain't you we're here to talk to, it's him."

"Me?" Sousuke met the man's glare with casual indifference.

"Sagara, was it? Step out with me, a'right?" said the man, inclining his head towards an alley between a McDonald's and a used book store across from the arcade.

"Are you asking me to accompany you?" Sousuke asked.

"'Swhat I said, dumbass. C'mon." The men led Sousuke into the alley.

Kaname, left behind, called out after them with some concern. "Sousuke!"

"Don't worry about me," Sousuke said over his shoulder, then disappeared into the alley with the men.

"That's not what I meant, Sousuke..." Rather, it was the other men she was worried about.

There were pools of dingy water all around the alleyway asphalt, and the last light of the setting sun was pouring in through the gaps between buildings.

One of the young men facing Sousuke spoke first. “Sagara, right? You’ve been actin’ pretty hot since you transferred to our school, eh?”

“What do you mean by that, exactly?” Sousuke wanted to know.

“I’m sayin’ we don’t like ya, eh?”

“I see. I’ll endeavor to avoid crossing paths in the future.” Judging that to be all they wanted to say, Sousuke immediately turned to leave.

“Hang on, jackass!” One of them reached for Sousuke’s shoulder.

Sousuke reflexively grabbed the hand, twisted it, and threw the other man into a puddle.

“Hey!”

“What the hell’s with this guy?”

“You wanna fight, eh?!” The men immediately prepared for a fight.

“If you want something from me, could you please state it plainly?” Sousuke asked.

“We wanna pop you one, eh?!”

“And swipe your cash, eh?!”

“Very well. I understand now.” Sousuke nodded. He understood well enough that they wanted to beat him up and take his money. (He didn’t understand why they said ‘eh’ every time, but it was clear they were robbers.) He unceremoniously drew the 9mm handgun he’d used to destroy the arcade game just minutes ago.

Blamblamblamblamblam! Gunshots resounded from the back alley.

“Ah, thought so...” Kaname, who had been waiting in front of the arcade, was in the middle of debating whether she should call an ambulance or play dumb and leave, when...

“Sorry for the wait,” said Sousuke, emerging from the alley. He seemed completely unaffected by whatever had just gone down.

“Please tell me you didn’t kill them,” Kaname begged.

“No, I put a few warning shots into the ground at their feet,” Sousuke reassured her. “Then they let me go.”

Having become somewhat accustomed to his tendency towards extreme measures, Kaname just nodded in easy agreement. “Oh okay,” she said.

“Let’s go, then.” The two began heading for the station along the shopping district’s main avenue. “But it’s kind of... not cool, you know?” Kaname spoke after a bit.

“What is?”

“Using a gun,” she clarified. “I mean, those guys were unarmed.”

“That’s true. They had only knives and billy clubs. Apparently they didn’t expect me to possess superior weaponry.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

Sousuke continued regardless. “If they wanted to beat me with weapons like that, they would have needed ten times the manpower: approximately fifty men in all.”

“Hmm. That confident, huh?”

“Well, it’s just that I only have about fifty rounds left,” he responded casually.

Kaname fell silent, imagining (polygon-based) punks wielding spiked bats, emerging from behind doors and drum canisters only to be shot one after another.

“What is it, Chidori?”

“Ah... Nothing. Forget it.” She took out her commuter pass as they entered the train station.

That night, in a small municipal park...

“What, back already?” The figure on the scooter said to the five young men sitting on the benches.

“Well... yeah...”

“Pathetic. Yeesh, you guys suck,” the figure said in disgust, as it took out a Marlboro cigarette and lit it with a 100-yen lighter.

The tiny light illuminated the figure’s face. It was a woman, and quite a tall one at that: she was at least 180 centimeters tall. She was wearing jeans and a leather jacket, and had wavy black hair that came down to her shoulders. She was certainly beautiful, in a fearsome sort of way.

“Well, guy had a gun...” said one of her goons, tall and lanky with an afro.

“So?” the woman demanded.

“Akutsu-san,” the lackey insisted, “you gotta watch out for guns. Remember, it was Nobunaga’s guns that defeated Takeda’s cavalry at the

Battle of Nagashino in 1575—”

“The hell are you talking about?”

Shrugging off her disdain, the man continued. “Takeda had the strongest cavalry of all the Sengoku warlords. But on the plains of Shitaragahara, Nobunaga used three thousand flintlock weapons— Ah, Akutsu-san, what are you doing?”

The woman had stood up, seized the handles of the scooter she’d been sitting on, and lifted the machine unceremoniously into the air. Then she swiped it to the side, slamming the rear wheel into the young man’s face.

“Blugh!” The man’s body flipped through the air two, three... even four times, before finally being stopped by a conveniently placed trash can.

“Spare me the arguments, dammit,” she snarled.

“I wasn’t arguin’, I was impartin’ knowledge...” the afro’d man said, weeping, his face buried in an empty lunch box from a convenience store.

The violent act sent the other men into a flurry of whispers.

“Did she really hafta do that?”

“Well, Akutsu-san failed history, so...”

“Wow, really? I heard it was home ec...”

The woman slammed the scooter back onto the ground and raised her voice over their whispers. “You guys got something to say to me?!”

“Nah, nothin’!” the four men said in unison, shaking their heads rapidly.

“Hmm... If this Sagara guy is so tough and well-armed, we’ll just need to use our heads,” she concluded. “Right?”

“‘Use our heads’? How?” the skinhead delinquent asked.

“I think we need some leverage,” she said thoughtfully. “He’s got a girlfriend, right?”

“Not sure...”

“A friend, then. Something. We just need a hostage to keep him from using his weapons.”

“Aha... I see.” The goons gave a clap in understanding.

“We’ll get ourselves a gang, too,” she continued. “Been a while since we put out a call to other schools.”

“How many?”

“Let’s see... Let’s go big. Fifty.”

The men turned pale, knowing that they could easily bring in that many if they mentioned her name.

“Make sure you tell them that I, Akutsu Mari, am bored to tears,” she declared, then turned the key in the engine and started up her scooter. “All right, I’m off.”

“What, already?”

“My little brother asked me to pick up some things,” she said. “Do they sell India ink at convenience stores?”

The men just looked at each other. “Dunno...”

During lunch break, an ascending four-note chime played over the school’s PA system.

“Ah, testing. Testing. Vice President Chidori Kaname, please come to the student council room. This is an order from the president. That is all.” Then, after turning off the microphone, the speaker looked back down at the paperback he was reading.

This was Hayashimizu Atsunobu, the student council president. He had a long, slender face and slicked-back hair. Behind his wireframe glasses sat narrow, intelligent eyes, and he carried himself with a quiet dignity that seemed somehow out of place in a high school student. He was sitting in the student council room (of which he was master and fire safety chief), located on the fourth floor of the south building of Jindai High School.

About two minutes after the schoolwide announcement, there came a knock at the door.

“Come in,” he said. But it was Sousuke, not Kaname, who entered.

“Sagara-kun?” asked Hayashimizu. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry to report that Chidori’s been absent since this morning, Mr. President.” His manner was absurdly formal; Kaname had previously told him the student council president was the highest-ranking person in the school.

“That’s a shame, but please sit down. I have a request to make of you.”

“Sir.” Sousuke took his seat across from Hayashimizu as instructed.

“The principal passed on to me a complaint filed by an arcade near Sengawa Station. She claimed that you and Chidori-kun destroyed a game cabinet there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The principal has requested that you write ten notices of contrition. If you do, then the school will pay the damages for you. What do you say to

that?”

“I won’t do it,” Sousuke denied flatly.

“And why is that?”

“I have no reason to feel contrite. It’s common sense that in order to minimize stray shots, it’s better to use a familiar firearm over an unfamiliar one. If I were put in a similar situation in the future, I would make the same choice again,” he briskly explained. His sincerity only served to demonstrate the severity of his delusion.

“Hm. Are you sure that’s how you feel?” Hayashimizu asked again, his eyes glinting from behind his glasses.

Several members of the student council staff, listening in on the conversation, gulped in anticipation of Sousuke receiving a tongue-lashing from the president.

“Very well,” Hayashimizu unexpectedly concluded. “The student council will pay the compensation.”

“I appreciate that,” said Sousuke.

The aforementioned students all collapsed simultaneously, overturning the steel table at which they sat with a bang.

“What’s wrong with you all?” Hayashimizu asked them evenly.

“N-Nothing... But can we really do that?” the treasurer asked, clinging to the wall for support.

“No need to worry,” he reassured them. “We’ll pay from the C fund.” The C fund was a secret fund passed down through the Jindai High student council administrations that the teachers knew nothing about. It hadn’t been an especially large fund originally, but during his time as aide to the treasurer in his first year, Hayashimizu had personally managed to increase it tenfold. How he’d managed this, of course, was a mystery to everyone involved.

“It’s not about that,” the treasurer insisted. “It just seems inappropriate to mix personal and school business...”

“Think, Okuda-kun,” Hayashimizu said, his tone condescending. “I am the senior representative of the student body. If the principal tries to extort an apology out of me, I cannot simply roll over. Giving the teachers leverage on us will set a bad precedent.”

“But it’s just a little apology...”

“It’s written evidence, which is especially perilous,” Hayashimizu

continued. “Such an action could come back to haunt a future student council administration fifty years from now.”

“Uh-huh...” Realizing how ill equipped they were to out-argue the president, the other students unanimously decided to let it go.

Just then, the door to the hallway opened with a bang. “Hey, Sagara in here?!” A male student with piercings all over his face bellowed, bursting into the student council room. It was one of the boys who’d accosted Sousuke the day before.

“How can I help you?” Sousuke turned to face the man calmly. He found the facial accessories a bit curious, but decided they might have religious significance.

“You mighta showed you’se pretty tough, eh? Mayb’we oughta taken you more seer’s, bu’now ’stime we go’ssum payback, eh?” the boy sneered, affecting an exaggerated tough-guy slur to his speech.

Sousuke, meanwhile, simply assumed he had some kind of autonomic nerve disorder. “I see. This must be very hard for you.”

“Ehhn?”

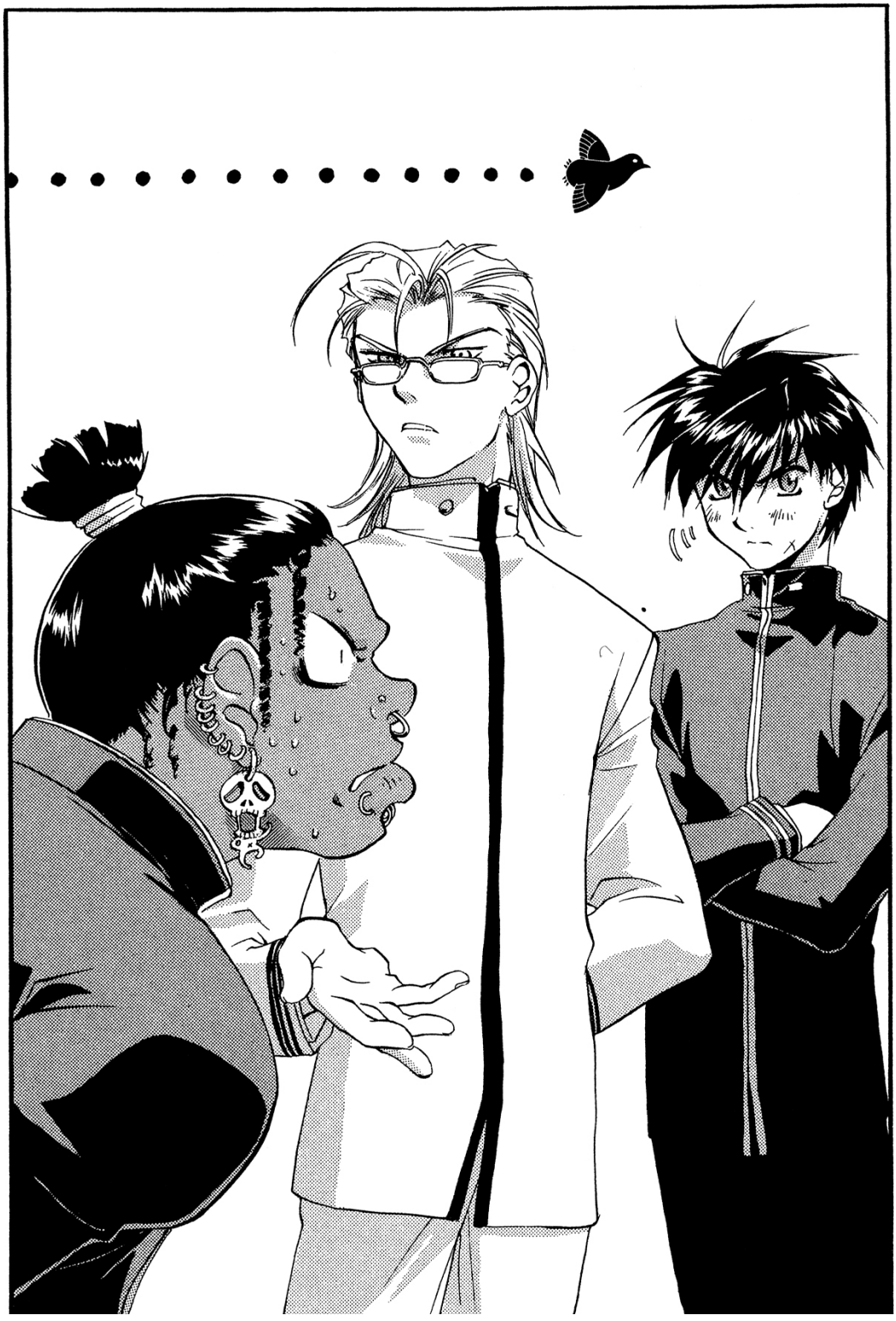
“I knew a soldier with a similar disorder,” Sousuke went on. “He was a brave man, but took a blow to the head that caused incurable facial paralysis.”

“Th’ hell you sayin’, eh?!”

“Hold on a moment,” Hayashimizu interrupted impatiently. “Sagara-kun, this man seems to bear some enmity towards you. He’s saying that he’s come for revenge after the recent beating you gave him.”

“Ah, I see,” Sousuke said solemnly. “Tell him this, then: ‘My equipment and skill far outstrips yours. Any attempt at revenge will be fruitless.’”

Hayashimizu nodded and turned back to the man with the piercings. “Sagara-kun says, ‘Shaddap, ya piece’a shit. G’won an’ try an I’ll jus’ kick yer ass, eh?’”



Sousuke was deeply impressed by Hayashimizu's smooth use of delinquent language. "Your linguistic skills are truly remarkable, Mr. President," he said.

"I've merely done some reading on the subject," Hayashimizu denied modestly. "That was the Western dialect, of course, so I'm not sure he'll understand me..."

"H-Hang on a sec, eh?!" The man with the piercings, now angry at being treated as some kind of indigenous denizen of unexplored lands, slammed his fist down on the desk.

Faster than the eye could see, Sousuke drew his gun and trained it on the man's forehead. "Please refrain from violence in this room."

The man froze on the spot. "H-Hang on. I ain't here for that. Just listen to this." Regaining his composure instantly, he carefully pulled out a cellular phone and punched in a number. After a brief back and forth, he then handed the phone to Sousuke.

"Hello?"

"You the guy they call Sagara?" came an unfamiliar woman's voice.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'll tell you all about it later. Meet me after school. We've got some things to discuss."

"I refuse," Sousuke said flatly.

"What's the matter, scared?"

"No, but I need to stay late after school to finish my carving for art class."

"Oh, really? You sure about that?"

There was a pause, and then a very familiar voice met Sousuke's ear. "Sousuke... it's me."

"Chidori? What are you doing there?"

"Some people grabbed me near the station this morning," said Kaname. "Today's softball in gym, so I really wanted to come..."

"Are you hurt? Where are you?"

"I'm not hurt... ah!"

The first voice came back. "See now? Better come, or your pretty little thing here pays the price."

"What do you mean by that?" Sousuke demanded.

"I'm not into girls, myself, but there's tons of guys here who'd love to

have a go at her...”

He could hear raucous laughter from the other end of the phone.

“Come alone to the old Okawa precision machinery factory in Sengawa by 5 p.m.,” the woman told him. “It’s on Seijo-doori Avenue.” Then the call cut off.

“Well? Got your attention, eh?” The messenger smiled gleefully.

“You’ve taken her hostage, then?”

“Bet your ass we did. And there ain’t a damn thing that little peashooter of yours can—”

Ignoring the man’s boasts, Sousuke turned to Hayashimizu. “Mr. President?”

“Right.” Hayashimizu caught his drift immediately and turned to face the other staff present. “Would you all mind giving the three of us some privacy? We need to talk.”

The students shared a few nervous glances, but left obediently enough. Once the last of them were gone, Sousuke shut the door behind him and snapped the lock into place.

“’cha doin’ there, eh?” asked the cagey-looking punk.

Hayashimizu replied with a wince, “I’m afraid you’ve committed the foolish act of taking our vice president hostage.”

“Th-The hell you talkin’ about? H-Hey...”

Sousuke turned toward the man and took one step, then another.

The punk drew back in fear as Sousuke pulled piano wire and handcuffs from his pockets. “Wh-What’re you doin’? Hey... hey!”

“Now, tell me all about your leader,” said Sousuke, drawing his combat knife.

That evening, in a dusty factory...

“What’s wrong? Scared?” Akutsu Mari asked Kaname, who was sitting on a large wooden box, her body bound with a vinyl cord.

“Actually, it’s more like...” Kaname paused for a moment. There was a sticky note like you’d see on a Jiangshi vampire hanging from her forehead; it read ‘Hostage—Do Not Touch.’ She finally settled for, “Can you do something about this?”

“Oh, you *definitely* want that there,” Mari said, indicating with her chin the papers stuffed into Kaname’s pocket. They had been foisted upon her by

the various delinquents, each one containing a phone number.

“Hmm. Yeah, they’re the kind of people you wouldn’t admit to being friends with, even if you’d taken photo stickers together. But...” Kaname looked out over the young men scattered around the huge factory. “Don’t they have anything better to do?”

There were just about fifty gathered in all: some were on scooters or modified motorcycles; some held steel pipes; others wielded spiked bats; and still others had Japanese swords. “Do they all work for you?” Kaname added as she watched them.

“Basically,” Mari responded bluntly. “Just so you know, if Sagara doesn’t come, I really will let them have their way with you. They did come here for me, after all. I’ve got to give them something for their trouble.”

“Ugh, really don’t want that...” Kaname said with a groan.

Twenty minutes later, just before 5 p.m., there came a shout from outside. “Akutsu-san, he’s here!”

“I am,” said Sagara Sousuke, silhouetted by the sunlight of early evening as he came through the three-meter-high door.

“Hey... not bad looking.” Mari said with a whistle as the fifty punks under her command moved to surround Sousuke, glaring at him from a distance, mouths half-open. It looked like a scene out of a *Shonen Magazine* comic.

But while an ordinary person would either shrink away or burst out laughing when presented with this sight, Sousuke simply proceeded with confidence, coming to a stop about ten steps in front of the rusty container upon which Mari was sitting. “I’m here,” he said in a quiet but penetrating voice. “Release Chidori.”

“First, lose the weapons. I hear you’ve got lots of dangerous stuff on you,” said Mari, drawing Kaname closer and forcing her delicate jaw upwards.

“Ow, ow...” Kaname winced.

Mari pressed a carpenter’s saw to her cheek. “A box-cutter would heal too quickly,” she told Kaname. “This one’ll leave a scar for life. You okay with that?”

“Wah! Cut it out!” Kaname shrieked.

Sousuke pulled the handgun from his back holster and dropped it on the

dusty floor.

“Is that it?” Mari demanded. “I said *all* of it.”

“All of it, eh? Just a moment.” Sousuke unbuttoned his uniform coat and began to remove the rest of his equipment. And out it all came: four spare magazines for his 9mm; a .38 caliber revolver; a combat knife; a kukri; two throwing knives; two hand grenades; two stun grenades; high-grade explosives with a trigger fuse; a stun gun; tear gas; mini-syringes, pre-loaded with various chemicals; plus tons of other dangerous-looking objects whose purpose could not be readily identified.

As the group looked on, stunned, he removed his jacket and showed it to them inside-out. “I’ve done as you asked,” he told them. “Now, release Chidori.”

“Oh? And when did I say I’d release her, eh?” Mari shouted back theatrically, and the men cackled in response.

“That’s... That’s not fair!” Kaname argued.

Mari grabbed a fistful of her hair. “That’s right,” she agreed. “I don’t play fair. I’m also damn strong and short-tempered. And I’ve got a gang on my side, so basically no one can stop me. Any problems with that?”

The punks shouted things like “Awesome!” and “Damn, she’s hot!” in gleeful reply to Mari’s declaration.

“Now... Let’s give that idiot what’s coming to him,” declared Mari, as the fifty-punk gang formed a ring around Sousuke and began to slowly approach him while brandishing their weapons.

“Sousuke, run!” Kaname shouted.

Sousuke had been raised on the battlefield, but he wasn’t superhuman. He could easily defeat four or five of these men, but fifty was out of the question. He’d be beaten black and blue and end up in the hospital for sure. He had no weapons and nowhere to run. It was a truly desperate situation!

But Sousuke simply remained calm and pointed towards the ceiling. “Look up, all of you.”

“Eh?” The group did so. About eight meters above them, dangling from a rope affixed to one of the old factory’s steel beams, was a small boy of about ten years old. He wasn’t moving and appeared to be unconscious.

“Who’s that kid?” the men asked, scowling in their uncertainty.

But one jaw dropped at the sight of the boy—that of Akutsu Mari. “Y-Yoshiki!” she cried out.

“Yes, Akutsu Mari,” Sousuke told her. “That’s your little brother. I strung him up there in secret a little while ago.” Which meant Sousuke had been present long before he’d shown himself. No one had noticed as he’d clung to the ceiling, doing his work quietly above their heads!

“You don’t get along with your parents, but you do seem to care for your little brother,” he continued. “Aren’t you concerned for his well being?”

“I d-don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t try to hide it,” Sousuke chided her. “I’ve investigated you thoroughly. I used chloroform to abduct him from his elementary school ninety minutes ago. He should be waking up around now.”

As if on cue, the boy’s eyes opened. He immediately began screaming as he realized the position he was in. “Ah... S-Sis!” He wriggled, his body swaying. It was an extremely precarious position.

Mari turned pale. “Yoshiki! Don’t struggle!!!”

“There’s no need to worry,” Sousuke told her reassuringly. “Regular struggling won’t break that rope. Of course, that doesn’t mean that nothing will...”

He pulled a small remote control device from his pocket and pressed a button. *Pop!* A flash of sparks came from the steel beam the boy was hanging from. One of the ropes holding him burned away, causing his small body to drop about fifty centimeters.

“Waaagh!” The boy’s scream echoed throughout the abandoned factory.

“One of the five fuses this remote control activates is in the boy’s clothing,” Sousuke told them. “He’ll be badly injured if I activate it. But not even I’m sure which button it is... He’s been lucky so far.”

Who had ever heard of such a protagonist? The amorality of his tactics sent a silent shudder through all present, and tears appeared in Mari’s eyes. “Stop that, damn you! Let Yoshiki down! If you don’t...”

“If I don’t? What then?” Sousuke pressed another button, followed by another small explosion. The boy’s body dropped another fifty centimeters.

“I’m scared, Sis! Save me!”

“Yoshiki!” Mari screamed.

“He won’t survive a fall like that unscathed. And there are only three buttons left,” Sousuke said, unfazed by their screams of terror.

“Damn you! Don’t you care what happens to the woman?!” Mari yelled, pressing the saw up to Kaname’s neck.

“You wish to kill her? I suppose that’s understandable.”

“Hey... Sousuke!” Kaname said angrily.

“Chidori. I’m sorry, but you will live or die with the boy,” Sousuke told her. “As vice president, I’m sure you understand. To prevent such an incident from ever happening again, one can never compromise with terrorists; this is international policy.”

“What the hell?!” she shrieked.

“Don’t worry. I’ll write the letter of condolence to your family.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Ignoring her, Sousuke turned to the other woman and said, “Now, Akutsu Mari. If you wish to save the boy, you must release Chidori and dismiss your subordinates. Will both live, or will both die?”

“Grr... hrkkk...” While the rest of the group watched in horror, Mari exchanged glances with her little brother and her gang. It was clear that giving in to emotion would lose her the respect of those under her command. And yet...

“Everyone has things that matter to them.” As if recognizing her dilemma, Sousuke spoke up, in a voice loud enough for the whole group to hear. “You, for instance. Yes, you.” He pointed to a large man holding a pipe. “Your name is Takayama Kiyoshi. You’re a second-year at Garasuyama High School. You have a little sister you care dearly for. She’s fourteen, attends Nishiyama Junior High, and comes home every evening around six o’clock down Benten Avenue—a fairly isolated road. You must be worried about strangers accosting her.”

“Y-You...” Hearing those words from a complete stranger drained the color from the young man’s face.

“And... you. Date Yuta.” He next addressed a man with a punch perm. “You keep a lovebird, don’t you? Your parents bought it for you when you were eleven years old. Its name is Pon-chan. I’m told lovebirds are extremely fragile. Just a little insecticide through a crack in the window causes painful convulsions and—”

“S-Stop it! Don’t say that!” Date pleaded.

“There’s nothing to fear. I’m simply talking about your lovebird. And...” Sousuke looked around at the fifty men surrounding him. They avoided his gaze, cold sweat on their brows, yet he continued to speak mercilessly. “Igarashi Koichi, you’ve got a motorcycle you worked your fingers to the

bone to buy. Endo Takashi, you were raised by your single mother, a former actress. Sugaya Shigeru, you recently began dating a woman one year younger than you. As did you, Godai Masayoshi. And Nakajima Shintaro, your sister—”

Five minutes later, fifty delinquent boys could be seen dejectedly marching out of the factory.

“You’re satisfied now, right? Let my brother down,” Akutsu Mari, the only party remaining, said wearily.

“Chidori first,” Sousuke said, using his knife to cut the vinyl ropes binding Kaname.

“Thanks. But, how do I put this...” Kaname glared at him.

He nodded in response. “I know what you’re thinking. I should have shot them all from a distance, rather than taking this roundabout route...”

“Not exactly. I was thinking, doing that to an innocent boy seems a little cruel. I mean, I can’t argue with the result, but the method...”

“Hmm. Is that what it’s about?” Sousuke pressed one of the buttons on the remote in his hand. The sound of an electric winch could be heard from above, slowly lowering the boy’s body to the ground.

“Eh?”

As the boy’s feet quietly met the floor, with Sousuke’s help, he removed the hemp rope he was bound in, along with a far sturdier (and cleverly attached so as not to be seen) climbing rope.

“Sagara-san. Did I do good?” the boy asked.

“Yes. Excellent work.”

“How’d you like my performance?”

“A professional counter-terrorism training hostage couldn’t have done better,” Sousuke told him. “It was excellent.”

“Heh! She sure was scared,” the little boy said gleefully. “Now, keep your promise.”

“The light-up super electromagnetic yo-yo, correct?” Sousuke checked. “I’ll buy it for you.”

Kaname and Mari just watched in disbelief.

“Hey! Sagara! Are you saying this was all an act?!” Mari grabbed Sousuke by the collar and began to lay into him.

“Yes,” Sousuke admitted. “The plan was my idea, and the president

helped me. He also provided me with the information on your subordinates.”

“The president? That bastard Hayashimizu?!”

Sousuke pried Mari’s hands free. “He asked me to give you his regards.”

“Dammit. Pretentious little shit...”

“Akutsu Mari. I did my best to ensure his safety, but you still exposed your little brother to considerable danger today,” Sousuke lectured her. “Don’t you have anything to say to him?”

Mari glared death at her little brother. “The hell I do! This little brat is gonna—”

But the little boy let it roll off his back. “You’re the stupid one, Sis. You had to take a hostage and call in a bunch of people just to threaten a guy. After all those lectures about how *I* need to be strong? That’s just sad.”

“I-I was just playing around because I was bored! Sheesh, get a grip already, kid! You’ve embarrassed the hell out of me already!”

“You brought this on yourself,” her brother announced airily.

“Grr...” Realizing she couldn’t win this one, Mari just fell silent. But after a moment, she said, “Sagara, I’m going to get you for this. Be ready.”

“Very well, but you should also be ready.” Sousuke leaned into the face of the taller woman. “To defeat an enemy with greater ability than one’s own always requires sacrifice. Before you commit to such an oath, you should make sure you aren’t underestimating me.”

Mari said nothing, seeming cowed by his words.

Just then, Kaname gave him a poke from behind. “Cut it out,” she told him. “That’s not the way to make amends with someone.”

“How can I make amends? I only just met her.”

“Totally not my point. Anyway, let’s head home... I’ll make you dinner as thanks.” Kaname took Sousuke’s hand and began to march him swiftly away. “Bye, Mari-chan, Yoshiki-kun. Take care.”

“Farewell, Akutsu Mari. Yoshiki, too,” said Sousuke. “Give utmost attention to your personal health management.” Then, half dragged away by Kaname, Sousuke left the old factory behind.

Mari whispered as she watched him go, stunned, “Who *is* that guy?”

“He’s pretty funny,” her brother opined. “He barged into my class and said ‘do you want to help me save someone?’”

“At your elementary school?”

“Yeah. The teacher got mad, but he pulled out a gun and said, ‘It’s an emergency’. Guess he was pretty worried about that lady.”

Mari suddenly realized that everything Sousuke had said was a bluff. The idea that he could have been lying when he declared, so coldly, that he would abandon her...

“Well... I’ve got to admit, he’s pretty impressive,” she whispered.

“Eh?”

“Nothing. I’m exhausted. Let’s go home, Yoshiki.”

“Sure.”

And so, Mari left the factory with her brother in tow.

A Lunchtime of Wasted Effort

Waga seko o yamato e yaru tosa yofuke akatoki tsuyu ni waga tachi nureshi.

It was a poem from the Man'yoshu, one of many which appeared on his printout for classical literature class. Merely staring at the phrase had Sagara Sousuke feeling lightheaded. His sullen expression was compromised by cold sweat, and his tight frown had begun to tremble in fear. He barely noticed the cheerful lunch break chatter around him.

"I don't understand..." he whispered to himself.

Waga seko o...

He knew that "waga" meant "my," but "seko" was new. He recognized the kanji as "back" and "child." Was the writer carrying a wounded child on his back? But what did "yamato e yaru" mean, when referring to that child? "Yaru" meant "to give," and "Yamato" was a super-dreadnought-class battleship of the Pacific War. Had he transferred the wounded child to a battleship? But why a battleship? Were there no field hospitals nearby? And how could the Man'yoshu, a poetry collection compiled over a millennium ago, possibly be writing about the Pacific War?

"I don't understand it at all..." Sousuke muttered to himself. Having been raised in war-torn regions abroad, he knew very little about Japanese history, and classical literature was his worst subject of all.

Their Classic Lit II teacher, Mr. Fujisaki, had asked them to analyze the language of eighteen of these poems and rewrite them in modern Japanese. The deadline was tomorrow. They'd had the assignment for four days, and he'd worked at it non-stop without deciphering a single verse. If he failed to submit it or turned in an incomplete, he'd be forced to spend his post-finals vacation in study hall.

"It's hopeless..." Feeling what remained of his mental energy finally slip away, Sousuke slumped sluggishly over his desk.

"What's the matter, Sousuke?" asked his classmate, Chidori Kaname. She was a girl with a mature air about her, and waist-length black hair tied

back with a red ribbon. At the moment, she was staring intensely at Sousuke.

“You’re not looking well,” she observed. “Kinda pale. You didn’t eat something off the ground, did you?”

“No,” he replied. “My health is without issue.”

“Really?”

“Really.” With that brief response, Sousuke tried to stow the print-out in his desk, but Kaname snatched it up before he could. “Ah...” he objected.

“What are you hiding there?” she asked. “Let’s have a look... aha! This explains it.” She caught on to the situation immediately and thrust the printout back at him with a smile. “You can’t handle classic lit,” she teased.

For some reason, Kaname’s triumphant attitude triggered a feeling of indignation in Sousuke. “What do you expect?” he asked defensively. “Nobody in Afghanistan or Cambodia was reading the Man’yoshu or the Tosa Diary.”

“True, you don’t hear much about Afghani guerrillas reading the Tosa Diary between campaigns...” Kaname was forced to admit.

“Indeed. But I could recite the Qu’ran from memory.”

“Oh, yeah? But this is due tomorrow during fifth period, right? Mr. Fujisaki’s really strict about deadlines,” she reminded him. “You gonna make it in time?”

“That’s none of your concern. This is my battle.”

“That seems a bit overdramatic...”

“But it *is* a battle,” Sousuke replied, completely serious.

Kaname made a brief show of thinking. Then she said, “Hang on a sec.” She whipped around, jogged back to her seat, and returned with a notebook, which she placed upon his desk. “Here.”

“What is this?”

“My classic lit notes,” she told him. “It’s got my answers to that assignment, so you can borrow it until tomorrow. If you copy it outright, we’ll get busted, but knowing the right answers in advance should help you get there on your own, right?”

“Hmm. But—”

“Oh, sorry. Am I being... a bother?” A hint of timidity revealed itself in Kaname’s voice.

“Well...” Sousuke trailed off, scrutinizing the situation. He’d conquered

any number of perilous situations under his own power before, but in this particular case, he knew there was no way he'd make it through without Kaname's aid.

"I'll take it, then," he decided. "Thank you."

"Good boy. Now, do your best." Kaname told him with a smile, and then hurried back to her seat. But before sitting down, she turned back once to say, "Just make sure you bring it back tomorrow. If you forget that notebook, I'll be stuck in study hall too. Got it?" she asked, pointing at him firmly.

"I won't forget. Don't worry," Sousuke told her, nodding in response.

Kaname's notes turned out to be just the reinforcements his "battle" needed. She had translated the first poem thusly: "My precious little brother is returning to Yamato. I watch him go, and as the night passes me by, I find myself drenched in the early morning dew. Ahh, poor me. La la la."

"I see," Sousuke mused. "'La la la,' eh?" That part didn't seem completely right to him, but it was a great help nevertheless. Most sleight of hand was simple enough to see through once you knew the trick behind it. Now he had an inroad, and it was time to return fire.

Sousuke returned to his apartment and spent all night working. It was an evening of much tribulation, but by the next morning, the final poem was done at last. "Mission... complete," he whispered, heaving a great sigh. His body felt heavy. His vision was blurred. The morning sun was streaming in from the window.

What a grueling task. I can't remember the last time I faced such a struggle, but at least I've lived to see another day, Sousuke reflected. *One more sunrise. One more assignment...* He let himself bask briefly in the relief and pride his accomplishment afforded him. Then he looked at the clock and saw that it was 0745 hours. He had to hurry or he'd be late to school. But as he closed Kaname's notebook to take off...

"Yeeeeek!" An almost otherworldly scream reached his ears. It was a woman's voice, coming from the next apartment to his, 506.

A burglar?! he thought, pulling out his pistol and dashing out the door.

•

Fourth period ended and the chime for lunch sounded. The classroom was soon as noisy as ever.

“So you broke down the door and burst into your neighbor’s apartment?” Tokiwa Kyoko was asking. As usual, she wore coke-bottle glasses and her hair was in braids. She was staring at Sousuke in faint disbelief.

“I didn’t have a choice. There appeared to be no time to lose,” Sousuke responded, seated at his desk. His eyes were bloodshot, and he seemed exhausted in a way that mere insomnia couldn’t account for. “But the woman who lived there mistook me for a home invader, and quickly turned her can of pesticide from the cockroach to me.”

“Makes sense. That stuff’s better than teargas.” Kyoko smiled at him awkwardly, then added, “It’s really your own fault, Sagara-kun.”

“I don’t understand why she shouted so loudly over a mere insect,” he protested. “It would be understandable if it were the bullet-ridden corpse of her husband, but...”

“Aw, I’d definitely scream if I woke up to a cockroach on my pillow!” Kyoko said, sounding a little excited for some reason.

Sousuke scrutinized her carefully. “Tokiwa,” he told her seriously, “such behavior could be fatal.”

“How so?”

“Once, I was involved in a top-secret operation in Peru. While doing recon in the jungle, I realized that a 10-centimeter venomous scorpion had made its way into my pocket.”

“Ahh...”

“I was deep in territory controlled by ruthless guerrillas,” Sousuke continued. “If I’d screamed then, the whole team would have been spotted and annihilated by the enemy.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“A simple bug is no reason to scream. I’m afraid I can never be on a team with you.”

“I wouldn’t really want that either,” said Kyoko.

Kaname arrived as the two were reaching this uneasy agreement. She’d seemed in good spirits all day, with a real spring in her step.

“Ah, Kana-chan,” said Kyoko.

“What’re we talking about?” Kaname asked. “Did you finish the

homework, Sousuke?”

“I did. Thanks to you.”

Kaname grinned. “Hey, great. Can I have my notebook back now?”

“Yes, wait a moment.” Sousuke reached into his bag. He searched around, and... “Drat.”

“Hmm?” Kaname asked back, still grinning.

Greasy sweat was forming on Sousuke’s brow. “Chidori. I’m not sure how to say this, but...”

“Yeees?”

“Allow me to remind you that, whether it’s running out of ammunition or losing radio contact, it is important to deal with disaster in a level-headed fashion.”

“Eh?”

“No matter how desperate the situation, one must never lose their temper or fly into a panic,” he told her urgently. “It’s a one-way road to self-ruin.”

“Care to explain what you mean by that?”

“I believe the chaos this morning was the cause,” he tried to explain.

“Seriously, could you just get to it?” Kaname urged him, growing understandably impatient.

“To put it bluntly...” Sousuke swallowed hard. “I left your notebook at home.”

Despite Sousuke’s best efforts, Kaname immediately lost her temper and flew into a panic. “W-W-Well what are you gonna do about it?!” She turned white as a sheet, seized him by the collar and shook him back and forth, her movements so violent that it sent character art off-model.

“We’ll figure something out. Please calm down, Chidori,” pleaded Sousuke.

“How the hell am I supposed to calm down?!” she screamed. “I’m gonna get stuck in study hall! This sucks! And without a part-time job during post-finals vacation, I won’t have any spending money next month! You know that, and you... you... arrgh!” Kaname was momentarily airborne. A second later, she was behind Sousuke, both arms wrapped around him. “How can *you* be so calm?!”

“Erk!” was all Sousuke managed to choke out. She’d gotten him in an unusual joint lock, spreading his arms wide like an eagle.

“Is that the legendary Paro Special?! I had no idea there was a user so close by!” Kyoko shouted excitedly.

Enduring the searing pain in both of his shoulders, Sousuke attempted to pacify Kaname. “I’ll do... something. I’ll go to the teachers’ office... and explain things to Mr. Fujisaki. I’ll ask him... to let you submit your homework... late. I’m sure he’ll... understand...”

“Hmph.” Kaname released Sousuke abruptly. “Go on! Right now!” She pointed to the door. Sousuke nodded and exited the classroom like a bat out of hell.

Three minutes later, Sousuke returned to the classroom, also like a bat out of hell. “I’m back, Chidori.”

“Well?!”

“No luck.”

Whap! Kaname slapped Sousuke with the paper fan she’d spent the past three minutes folding. “Don’t say it so proudly! That sucks!”

“More precisely, Mr. Fujisaki wasn’t there. From what the other teachers said, he’s...” He then stopped hesitantly for a moment.

“He’s...?”

“No, it’s unthinkable,” Sousuke adamantly denied. “He’ll surely be back by fifth period.”

“What will you do, Kana-chan?” Kyoko asked timidly.

“Urgh... this suuucks.” *Warning. Warning. Emergency. Emergency.* Kaname thought hard as the alarm bells rang in her mind. *Classic literature is fifth period. Mr. Fujisaki will collect assignments first thing, and he never accepts assignments any later. He treats latecomers as absent. He’s that strict. There’s no excuse that’ll get you off the hook. It’s 12:38. Fifth period*

starts at 1:30. I've got fifty-two minutes.

Fifty-two minutes, she thought again. *Not much time. But if I spend any more time thinking about it...*

"Okay, Sousuke," she declared out loud, "let's get my notebook!"

"From my apartment?" he asked doubtfully.

"Of *course*, from your apartment! Now, hurry!"

"Ah, Kana-chan!" Kyoko called after them.

But Kaname had already seized Sousuke by the scruff of the neck and run him out of class fast enough to create a sonic boom. She flew down the hall, and then the stairs, and then out of the school gate, all without changing into her street shoes.

"Taxi!!!" she yelled, before throwing Sousuke into the street, which forced a passing cab to come to a screeching halt.

Had it been even ten centimeters closer, Sousuke would've been rust on its bumper. Such a close call sent a shudder even through the battle-hardened veteran. "Are you trying to kill me?!" he asked.

"Shut up! Get in!" Kaname shoved Sousuke into the taxi and, interrupting the driver's protests, said, "Tigers Apartment Complex in Tamagawa! Near the tennis club! Go, go, go!" She pounded on the plastic divider. Duly intimidated, the driver stomped on the gas pedal and sped them away.

In contrast to their initially speedy getaway, the scenery now passed by in a calm and quiet manner. Kaname remained in sullen silence, her eyes flicking from the window to her watch and back. At times she'd click her tongue in annoyance and mutter something sourly.

Sousuke was hunched over, making himself as small as he could. "Chidori. I..."

"Shut up. I don't want excuses," she said icily. "You've made it perfectly clear how little you care about my well-being. We're *done*."

"I really am sorry," he said.

"If sorry fixed everything, we wouldn't have wars and we wouldn't need soldiers," she snarled back. "You know what I mean? *Sergeant Sagara Sousuke, specialist?*"

Sousuke fell silent, seemingly cowed by her sarcasm. And Kaname, still at the height of her fury, wasn't about to consider if maybe she'd gone too

far.

Ten or so minutes passed in that toxic atmosphere, and at last, the taxi pulled up in front of Sousuke's apartment building. The time was 12:56. They'd arrived sooner than expected—understandable, since it was all within the same locality—and at this rate, they'd get back with time to spare.

"1280 yen, please," the driver said.

"I'll pay," Sousuke insisted.

"You'd better. And we'll need a ride back, so could you wait a few minutes?" Kaname called back, jumping out of the taxi.

She heard the driver say "rough times, eh?" to Sousuke, but chose to ignore him as she ran down the hall to the elevator.

Upon arrival at apartment 505, Sousuke barged in without removing his shoes.

"Hurry!" Kaname urged him.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Kaname waited in the hallway. After a few seconds, she noticed that the door for the neighboring apartment 506 was broken. It looked like it had been blown off its hinges, then temporarily leaned back into place. She tilted her head at it curiously, but had little time to wonder before Sousuke rushed out of the room with two notebooks in hand.

"I found them," he declared. "Let's head back."

"Hmm? Ah, right," she agreed. "Let's go!" They ran back to the hall, dove into the still-waiting elevator, descended to the first floor, ran out the door, and...

As they made it outside, they found that the taxi had left without them.

"No way..."

There was simply no sign of it. As they stood there in silence, a truck for a local bar drove past.

"I *did* tell him to wait, right?" Kaname asked.

Sousuke replied, his brow drawn severely. "Yes, and I reinforced your warning, telling him that he was not to leave this spot until we returned."

"Then what happened?"

"I don't know. I flashed my pistol to make it clear that I'd kill him if he ran, and—"

Whap! Kaname slapped Sousuke with the fan clutched tight in her hand. “Well, no wonder he ran!!!”

“Urgh...” said Sousuke.

Having reached her breaking point, Kaname covered her face with her hands. “I’m so tired,” she wailed. “Why do you have to be like this? Why do you always make me suffer? Why can’t you just once help things turn out smoothly and peacefully, and then in the end, say ‘not an issue’ in a cool voice? Why do you always, always, *always* have to make things worse? Why are you so lacking in the traits that make someone a protagonist, or a hero, or a prince on a white horse?!” The last part she screamed for everyone on the street to hear.

Meanwhile, Sousuke watched the seconds tick away on his wristwatch, his face going pale. “I understand your anger,” he admitted, “but that lecture took 26 seconds. What are we going to do? We won’t be able to get another taxi.” There wasn’t much traffic in this area, and there was no sign of a new cab showing up anytime soon.

Kaname snapped back to her senses. “Geh... this is no time for hysterics,” she told herself. “What do we do?”

“Let’s try this.” Sousuke walked out into the apartment’s parking lot, pulling out his pistol. *Blam!* He fired abruptly, blowing the chain off of a parked bicycle. He mounted the vehicle in a lithe motion and then pedaled up to Kaname. “Get on,” he urged her.

“Isn’t this illegal?!” she asked.

“We’re just borrowing it. I’ll repair it and return it later,” he promised. “Hurry.”

“Ugh, this is unbelievable!” said Kaname, but ended up sitting behind him on the bicycle anyway. She didn’t straddle it, but sat girlishly with her legs together. “I mean, my own apartment is over there, and I have my own bike...”

“Yet every second counts,” he reminded her. “Let’s go.”

“Eek!” She had to wrap her arms around Sousuke’s waist so as not to be thrown off as the bike abruptly sped off.

Sousuke’s pedaling power was impressive. The scenery sped past, even with two people on board. It was as if Kaname’s weight were completely immaterial to him as they passed through what was otherwise a sleepy

afternoon in the Tokyo suburbs. They overtook slow-moving scooters, ignored traffic signals, and cut through intersections.

“You think we’ll make it like this?” Kaname asked.

“I don’t know,” Sousuke admitted, “but we have no other choice.” But soon, they came to a hill. It wasn’t an especially steep one, but it did go on a while. It seemed like it would be pretty rough when biking for two. “I’m going to... keep going,” Sousuke puffed.

“Nice resolve,” Kaname told him. “Go!”

Sousuke stood up from the saddle and worked the pedals hard. At first, they made swift progress up the hill. But when they reached roughly the halfway point, they began to slow. Sousuke’s breathing grew more and more labored.

“Should I get off?” Kaname asked.

“No need... for that,” Sousuke replied, but there were signs of strain in his voice, as well.

“Um, you don’t have to drive yourself to exhaustion...” she told him.

“If I collapse... continue on your own.”

“Umm...”

“This is all my fault,” Sousuke reminded her. “Don’t concern yourself with me.”

“Y-You bet it was,” Kaname agreed hesitantly. Then she rallied with, “I’m not a bit concerned! I’ll ditch you on the spot.”

Meanwhile, Sousuke continued diligently working the pedals. The almost audible creaking of his muscles had Kaname feeling strangely self-conscious. *I guess he really is a guy...* she thought idly, and tried to hold down her hair, which was streaming in the wind.

Sousuke’s labor finally paid off as the bicycle made it to the top of the hill, then tore off again down the flat residential road.

“Hey, great work,” Kaname encouraged him.

“No, there’s still a long way to go,” he disagreed. “There’s still the main road—”

“I see you riding two to a bike! Halt!” came a woman’s voice over a loudspeaker. They could see a police minicar racing toward them from behind.

“Erk...”

“The authorities?” Sousuke whispered. But he didn’t stop pedaling... in

fact, he sped up!

“Sousuke?!” Kaname exclaimed incredulously.

“Think you can get away, eh?! Think again!” said the officer, whose voice sounded strangely determined. The minicar’s engine roared as it flew in pursuit.

“She’s after us! What do we do?!”

“We can’t afford to be caught on a stolen bicycle,” Sousuke told her. “We’ll end up spending a night in a jail cell.”

“Um, I don’t think it’s quite a jailable offense... eek!” cried Kaname, as he took a hard turn onto the narrow local road, almost running down an old couple walking their dog in the process.

The minicar followed them and missed a few pedestrians by a hair’s breadth. “You’ll have to do better than that!” the policewoman cackled. Already halfway up on the sidewalk and still accelerating, the minicar began to close in on them. It actually felt less like she was trying to arrest them, and more like...

“She’s trying to kill us!” Kaname shrieked.

“Bwahaha!” the officer cackled. “Prepare to die!” Then, in an ostentatious violation of traffic laws, she maneuvered her minicar fully onto the sidewalk in order to continue her pursuit.

Kaname wasn’t sure what this officer’s deal was, but she clearly had an extreme personality.

“Not bad...” Sousuke muttered. They were approaching a T-intersection. “Chidori. When I give the signal, jump off the bike.”

“Huh? But you—”

Sousuke gave no room for argument as he jerked the handlebars and slid the back wheel forward, shouting, “Now!!!”

Kaname had no time to think; she simply leaped off the bicycle as instructed. She cried out in alarm as centrifugal force threw her back in the direction they’d previously been traveling. She managed to land safely on her feet, but the momentum carried her forward, forcing her to roll end-over-end to blunt the impact. Meanwhile, Sousuke completed a 180 degree turn and charged his bike straight at the incoming minicar.

“What?!” shouted the officer.

Once he’d reached sufficient speed, he leaped lightly off the bicycle, which continued racing towards their pursuer. When the two collided, the

minicar ran over the bike and began to zigzag from its course.

“No... it can’t be!” came the policewoman’s strangely villainous cry.

Sousuke had leaped to an electric pole as the minicar drove past below. Kaname also swiftly leaped onto a nearby fence, just barely avoiding the out-of-control car.

The minicar lost control, plowed into the T-intersection, and crashed into the fence of a private residence. A terrible crash sounded out, followed by screams and the barking of dogs. Steam spurted from the radiator.

“Wh-What...” Kaname was still clinging to the fence in shock when Sousuke tugged at her arm.

“Let’s run,” he suggested.

“Eh? Ah, right...” After all that, it was even more imperative that they avoid arrest. Kaname jumped back down to the road, fleeing the scene of the crime with Sousuke.

“Honestly, what if I’d been hit?!” Kaname yelled at Sousuke as they ran along on foot.

“But you weren’t.”

“But you didn’t know I wouldn’t be!”

“I trusted that you wouldn’t let it happen,” he told her.

“Sheesh. Still...” Kaname shook her head as she recalled the dire situation they were still in. They had to get back to school fast, or she’d still be doomed to a post-exam vacation full of make-up classes.

“We’ll have to try our luck with the train,” she decided. “We got some distance with the bike, so if we can catch the rapid-service train at the station...” Kaname glanced at her watch: It was 1:11 p.m., just nineteen minutes until class began!

“I think we can still make it,” Sousuke told her.

“Hurry!” she cried, as they both upped their pace. Sousuke’s prowess went without saying, but Kaname was also at the top of the school for athletic ability. The various sports clubs had tried fervently to recruit her since her initial arrival. At any rate, the pair ran fast, inspiring surprised looks from onlookers. Sousuke started falling behind for some reason, so Kaname shouted back, “Get a move on!”

“I’m trying!” he yelled.

The residential district gave way to a commercial one. They crossed a congested street, using the hood of a stopped car as a springboard into the shopping area near the station. They hung in the air for a few seconds before landing, then continued on their run. The crossing had been accomplished with beautiful synchronicity; they didn’t even argue with the people honking at them.

“I was just looking at the timetable and...” Sousuke said, not slowing his pace as he examined his pocket train timetable. “The train will leave the station... in roughly thirty seconds. There won’t be another rapid one for a while.”

“Ugh, this stinks!” Kaname screamed.

They were closing in on the station. The city’s inbound line train was already on the platform.

“That’s the train,” Sousuke puffed. “If we miss it, it’s over.”

There were mere seconds remaining before the train left. They’d never make it if they went the normal route, buying a ticket and climbing the stairs. “We’ll have to break through!” Kaname cried out. “Straight ahead!

“Understood...”

The two dashed with all their might. They cut across the bus terminal and streaked for the station fence, which was two meters high. Climbing it would be difficult, but...

“I’m going!” Kaname shouted.

“I’ve got you!”

Kaname used Sousuke’s shoulders as a springboard and jumped, making it to the top of the fence. She held out her hand to Sousuke below. He grabbed it, and... “One, two...!” She pulled with all her might, and Sousuke’s legs did the rest of the work.

Having then surmounted the fence, the two of them rolled onto the rails in a painful heap. Fortunately, none of the station personnel saw them. Then the departure chime began sounding out; the train was about to leave!

“Hurry!”

“I’m... hurrying...”

The rest of their movements showed a spark of the divine. They raced across the tracks, vaulted onto the platform, and tore like a bullet for the train...

“Make... it... in... time!”

They leaped for the train’s doors the instant before they shut, hit the floor, and were carried by momentum into the opposite set of doors.

Kaname panted. Sousuke was silent. The two sat up, sweating, their shoulders heaving, as the other passengers stared at them in shock. The train noisily departed the station.

“We made it,” Sousuke said at last, breathlessly.

“Hahh... hahh... ha ha ha... I thought we were done for...” Kaname stood up, leaning heavily against the now-closed door as she straightened out her rumpled clothes and looked at her watch. It was currently 1:16 pm, still fourteen minutes until the start of fifth period.

The rapid-service train should have us at Sengawa, the station closest to Jindai High, in six minutes, she speculated. “Hey, plenty of time! We can walk from Sengawa Station to school in a flash!” she said cheerfully.

“It does appear we’ve done it,” Sousuke agreed, “though it was a close call.”

“Seriously. We really pushed it back there, huh?”

“I’m frequently amazed by your decisiveness,” he said in tones of wonderment.

“I’m just glad we made the rapid-service train. It’s been a real Saio’s Horse kind of day, you know?”

“I don’t know who Saio is, but I am indeed grateful for the rapid train,” Sousuke agreed.

“Weirdo.” Kaname laughed cheerfully, and Sousuke gave her a slight nod in response. “We really were pretty in sync, huh? There at the end.”

“Indeed. We made an excellent team.”

They gazed at each other. Sousuke’s expression was as blank as ever, but if she looked closely, she could see a slight loosening in the usual severe cast of his eyebrows. He, too, seemed quite pleased with himself... and Kaname was enjoying the resonance between them. She had completely forgotten how, ten minutes ago, she’d wanted to strangle him to death.

The train began to pick up speed. As a rapid-service train, it should be at Sengawa Station in no time.

The announcement echoed through the car: “Thank you for riding the Keio Line today. This is the *limited express* bound for Shinjuku. The next stop will be Meidaimae. Meidaimae...”

The two froze.

“Limited... express?” Kaname’s smile froze on her face as she turned to stare at Sousuke.

His expression was still blank, but now it had returned to its usual severity... coated now, additionally, with a layer of greasy sweat.

“Sousuke,” she said. “Didn’t you say... this was the rapid-service train?”

“I did,” he agreed, “Though it pains me to admit it.”

Kaname pointed at the floor. “But this is the *limited express*, right?”

“It does appear so.”

“The limited express is faster than the rapid, but it doesn’t stop at Sengawa Station,” she told him. “Did you know that?”

“I did. Unfortunately.”

“Care to explain yourself?”

“It appears I was looking at the weekend chart,” he admitted. “It was extraordinarily careless of me. A beginner’s mistake.”

“Aha ha... ha.” Kaname grabbed Sousuke by the lapels and yanked open the nearby window. “The only cure for stupidity is death.”

“Calm down, Chidori,” he begged.

“Die! You’re going to die right here and now! If you feel any repentance at all, you owe me that much!” The other passengers tried to intervene as Kaname attempted to hurl him from the still-accelerating train.

Their limited express passed right by Sengawa and stopped seven stations down at Meidaimae. Sousuke and Kaname switched to the outgoing line, and not long after, her watch read 1:30 p.m.

“It’s over... it’s all over,” Kaname whispered, her thoroughly-used fan and notebook clenched tight in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” Sousuke sincerely apologized, shoulders slumped. There were bags under his eyes, and he looked completely lifeless. “Something’s wrong with me today. I’ve never made so many fatal mistakes in such short succession in...” He stopped himself, seeming to realize that what he was saying just sounded like an excuse. “No... It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry.”

He sounded so pitiful and exhausted that Kaname found it suspicious. “Sousuke... are you sure you’re not sick? You really have been acting pretty out of character today...”

“That can’t be the case,” he denied. “I feel perfectly—”

Before he could finish his objection, Kaname put her palm to Sousuke’s forehead. “Hey, you’ve got a serious fever!” *It has to be over 39 degrees Celsius,* she realized. *That kind of fever would lay up most people all day. He did all that, in this condition...*

“It’s merely a cold,” he said dismissively. “Not an issue.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded. “Running all around with a

fever like this... are you nuts?!”

“It won’t kill me.”

“It might, stupid! Why did you have to be so reckless...” Kaname began to lecture him, and then remembered that he was acting so recklessly *for her*. If he hadn’t felt so guilty about letting her down, he never would have pushed himself this far.

“Oh, for the... I guess that makes me the bad guy, huh?” she asked with a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“That’s not what I meant. If I’d known you were sick, I wouldn’t have gotten so mad.”

Sousuke looked at her in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah,” she said, “not even I’m that mean.” Naturally, she was annoyed that he’d forgotten her notebook. But she was the one who’d lent it to him in the first place, after all. Thinking about it rationally, it wasn’t right to lay the blame solely on Sousuke.

Kaname let out a deep sigh. “It’s okay,” she told him. “Stop worrying about it.”

“Do you forgive me?” he asked.

“We just didn’t make it. It’s time to accept that. I know you tried your best, okay? We can take the make-up classes together.” And with those words, Kaname felt a burden lift off of her shoulders. Shooting Sousuke a small smile, she said, “In exchange, take a rest in the nurse’s office when we get back to school. Okay?”

“Very well. I’ll rest,” Sousuke agreed, gazing glassily into midair.

Fifth period classes were well into session by the time they entered the school building. Kaname headed for the nurse’s office with the limp Sousuke hanging off her shoulder.

“But I’m pretty surprised to learn that you’re not above catching a cold,” she told him.

“I feel the same way.”

They explained things to the nurse, and...

“You’re lucky. We have one free bed,” she said with a smile. Apparently, there were a lot of sick people today. The nurse and Kaname helped the limp Sousuke to the bed. As they did, Sousuke’s arm caught on the

partitioning curtain. It moved aside, revealing the patient in the next bed over: a teacher in his early forties.

Kaname's eyes went wide at the sight. "M-Mr. Fujisaki?!"

"O-Oh... Chidori? What is it?" rasped Mr. Fujisaki, their Classic Lit II teacher.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I caught a cold... I passed out in third period... It's pathetic. How is your class doing with study hall?"

"S-Study hall?" she choked out.

"Yes... I forgot to ask," he realized. "That homework... Chidori, as class representative, will you collect it for me?"

"Wh-What?!"

"Have it on my desk... before the end of the day," he begged. "Please..."

Incredible! We're saved! Kaname thought, stunned, as she met Sousuke's eyes.

"So... it laid you out, after all?" Sousuke asked in a pained voice, while crawling into his own bed.

Hearing those words, Kaname furrowed her brow. "'After all'? What do you mean, 'after all'?"

"During lunch... I went to the teachers' office," Sousuke explained. "They said that Mr. Fujisaki collapsed with a fever in third period. I couldn't imagine he would... neglect his duty over a simple cold... But it seems this one... truly is... severe..."

"Why... Why in the world didn't you tell me at the start?!" Kaname yelled. "You could've just said he was sick and we might have study hall!"

Shocked by the sight of a schoolgirl wringing a sick boy's neck, the nurse quickly intervened to pull Kaname off of Sousuke.

"Chidori," Sousuke choked out, "putting one's faith in such things can be fatal..."

"How, exactly?!" Kaname shrieked back at him.

"Once... when I was on a top secret mission in Myanmar... We heard a rumor that... a capable enemy commander... had been injured and consigned to the back lines. We believed it, and..."

Kaname wasn't there to listen to Sousuke's ramblings. The revelation that all their efforts had been for nothing had filled her with so much rage and exhaustion that she'd left the office on the spot.

Only the nurse remained behind, wondering what to do now that there were no empty beds left.

Lethal Weapon of Blasphemy

Firearms were laid out across the floor of the barely furnished living room. There was a large variety of sizes represented, ranging from pocket pistols to 58kg machine guns. There had to be at least fifty of them present, all the personal property of Sagara Sousuke.

Sousuke was running maintenance with his usual sullen expression and tight frown. He rarely cleaned all his firearms this diligently; most of them he barely used, after all. Some were mementos of old comrades, but there were also some he'd bought and found disappointing. Some were simply overkill for most of his purposes.

But nevertheless, he had to get all of his guns properly clean. Today was New Year's Eve, after all. It was a time when one was supposed to get a fresh start to the year by getting their household (or closest equivalent) in order. Even for Sousuke, who'd grown up on the battlefield, this practice was common knowledge.

While he did battle with the firearms, he heard his nearby cellphone begin to ring. He answered it immediately. "Yes?"

"Hellooo, Sagara-kun? I'ss Tokiwa." It was Tokiwa Kyoko, one of Sousuke's classmates at Jindai High.

"Tokiwa? What is it?"

"Sayyy, you... you free t'day?"

"Not exactly free, but I'll hear your request." Holding the cell phone between shoulder and his cheek to keep his hands free, Sousuke continued to work as he spoke.

"Oh, 'sokay 'en? Cool. Got a kinda... favor t'ask. Can't do it without 'cha. See, 'cuz 'sjust us girls right now, an' we dunno what to do. C'mon, help out! Yeah... I really, reeeally need'jer help..."

Sousuke scowled in confusion. *Kyoko is acting strangely,* he thought, and stopped in the middle of polishing his high-powered .454 Casull revolver. "Has something happened, Tokiwa?" he asked.

"Naaah. Actually... yeeeah. Ha ha ha. Anyway, 'm thinkin' it'll work

out, an’ we maybe just need a boy... ’swhy I called. Yeah. C’mon, you get it!”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” he denied politely.

“’kay! So just come and help! ’sfine, ’sall over soon! We’ll get... sooo many snacks. C’mon, Sousuke. C’mon down with us... tee-hee.” After adopting an overly coquettish tone, she suddenly burst out laughing.

“T-Tokiwa?” Sousuke asked worriedly.

It was then that her voice abruptly turned plaintive. “Look... I just...” She let out a sob. “I’m sorry. It’s just... you’re the only one I can ask. Please help. See you later. Please come.”

“Um, Tokiwa—”

“We’re at Arahaba Shrine. Arahaba,” she repeated, cutting him off mid-sentence. “Please... Please come... Sagara-kun.”

Click. Beep, beep, beep...

A shrine? he wondered. It seemed as though one of his classmates had ended up at a shrine while in some sort of disordered mental state, and needed his help. He didn’t understand exactly what she’d been trying to describe, but she had said he was the only one she could ask. *A problem that only a master of weapons and battlefield veteran can handle,* he pondered next. *What could it be?*

It must be very serious, he decided. An image of Kyoko—perhaps being held hostage in an evil cult compound—found its way into Sousuke’s mind. Surrounded by hundreds of mad cultists, her sense of danger addled by drugs, forced to play victim in some barbaric ritual...

“I must act,” he said out loud, and pulled a map of the city from his desk drawer.

Cleaning his firearms could wait. First, he had to save Kyoto from the cultists.

“Waaaoooh! I feel good, na-na-na-na-na-na-na...” Chidori Kaname hummed to herself as she swept away at the flagstones. She was in a region of forested hills not too far from the city, on the grounds of a small shrine that was surrounded by large zelkova trees. The sky was blue, and the air was clear and pleasant.

She was dressed as a miko, in the traditional white kosode and red hakama. Her black hair, which usually hung down to her waist, was tied up

in a ponytail today. She'd gotten a part-time job here at the Arahaba Shrine, helping with cleanup during the busy end-of-year period.

"Great, all done." Kaname bagged the fallen leaves and trash she'd swept up, threw them out, and then returned to the shrine office. She went in through the back entrance and found Tokiwa Kyoko, asleep by the kotatsu in the middle of the tatami floor. Despite her ever-present coke-bottle glasses and braids, she was dressed as a miko too.

"Hey, Kyoko," said Kaname. "Still down for the count?"

"Ugh. Can't drink a'more..." Kyoko mumbled in response, her words slurring.

"Jeez, Kyoko. Who gets drunk off of one cup of sweet sake? You're not just trying to skip out on work, are you?"

"'course not... 'm really sorry... an' so... 'swhy..." With sluggish movements, Kyoko nudged the cell phone perched on top of the kotatsu. "Called for help..."

"Help?" Kaname echoed suspiciously.

"Yeah. Help... Asked 'im to come. 'll be here soon..."

"What are you talking about? Did you call someone?"

"Yep," Kyoko affirmed.

"Who?"

"Tee-hee... Your faaavorite person, Kana-chan..."

"Huh? What are you—"

Fwoom! Suddenly, the wall behind Kaname burst inwards, filling the room with smoke and wood fragments.

"Yeek!" Kaname pitched forward with a shriek, bowling over Kyoko and her kotatsu in the process.

Not a moment later, someone dove inside through the newly created hole in the wall. "Get down!" barked the figure, which was holding a shotgun.

The moment she heard the voice, Kaname sprang back off the floor and charged him fiercely.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said get—”

Smack! The Miko Punch landed and sent the intruder corkscrewing through the air before slamming into the floor. “I knew you’d pull something like this,” Kaname told them. “That’s why I didn’t tell you about my part-time job here...”

“Chidori?” Sagara Sousuke, dressed in black fatigues, pried himself up off the floor.

Kaname stood before him, legs spread and fists trembling. “You could give me a quiet New Year’s, at least! What the hell were you thinking?!”

“Well, everyone knows that the best way to infiltrate a room is to avoid the entrance and use shaped charges to blow a hole through an outer wall.”

Wham! The Miko Kick roared through the air, and Sousuke’s body hit the tatami mat again. “That’s not an explanation!”

“But given the situation, there was a significant chance that the cultists were using Tokiwa as bait to lure me out—” Sousuke tried to protest.

“Y-You...” The Miko Typhoon exploded. This was an unthinkably powerful move that sent the enemy spinning away at high speed, and Sousuke was quickly sent flying through a window and out of the shrine office altogether.

Kaname bowed deeply to the head priest, Hikawa Yoshikatsu. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” she said apologetically. “C’mon, say you’re sorry too!” She grabbed the nearby Sousuke by his neck and forced him to join her in bowing.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“Politely!”

“I’m very sorry.”

He didn’t sound the least bit sincere, but the head priest, Hikawa, smiled pleasantly nonetheless. “Ah, I forgive you,” he said graciously. “It’s clear you were acting out of concern for a friend.”

Hikawa was a small man, just past middle age. He had a clean-shaven head, arms that were short but thick, and a big potbelly. It was the archetypal Japanese physique, and looked perfect in hakama.

Hikawa’s magnanimity took Kaname by surprise. “Oh... really?”

“Of course,” he returned politely. “And it doesn’t look like there were any serious injuries.”

“Th-Thank you!”

“But I’d like him to help out at the shrine if he could. Given the state Tokiwa-san is in, we really do need help.”

“Hahh... You want Sousuke to help?” Kaname asked.

“Yes, is that a problem?”

Internally, Kaname felt nervous: past experience told her the best thing to do right now was to send Sousuke away ASAP. “Well, you certainly could do that... but I wouldn’t recommend it. I’ll do the work of two, so we should really send this idiot—”

“No, I’ll help,” Sousuke responded cleanly, sabotaging Kaname’s attempt to demur on his behalf.

“Oh, will you? I’d appreciate that very much,” Hikawa told him. “Chidori-san will tell you what to do. Is that all right, Chidori-san?”

“B-But...”

“Well, good luck. Sagara-kun, was it? Oh, and don’t enter the main shrine, no matter what. I told Chidori-san the same thing... Oh?” Hikawa had heard the phone ringing in the shrine office, and jogged away.

“Ah...” Left with no other choice, Kaname recruited Sousuke as her assistant. Kyoko was still asleep inside the shrine office, the hole now covered by a red-and-white-striped curtain.

The major purification ritual performed at every shrine had taken place that morning, so all that remained now were preparations for the evening’s festival. But the shrine wasn’t very large, so it wasn’t an especially big job. They’d burned the old hamaya arrows, prepared the newly received omikuji fortunes, readied snacks and sake for worshipers... all that kind of thing.

Work that would normally have been done before yesterday, like cleaning the shrine, was yet to be done. It seemed rather irresponsible, but not unexpected from such a small, local shrine.

As the two were carrying buckets of cold water toward the main shrine building, Kaname cast a dubious glance in Sousuke’s direction. “What are you up to?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You clearly don’t feel guilty at all about what you did, but you still offered to help,” she clarified. “That means you’re up to something.”

“I’m not up to anything,” Sousuke protested. “It’s just that something’s amiss at this shrine, and I thought it would be dangerous to leave you two here alone.”

“I explained this all before, remember? Kyoko’s fine; she was just drunk.”

“I’m aware of that. My issue lies elsewhere. Namely: why is the security at a so-called ordinary temple so strict?”

“Huh?”

“On my way here, I declined to ascend the stone steps to the front gate in favor of coming in through the back forest... but said forest was full of traps,” Sousuke explained. “No one without training like mine could have made their way through.”

“Traps? For the love of...” Kaname sneered at him, then looked around her. The grounds nearby were the image of peace and quiet. She (unsurprisingly) saw no sign of the traps Sousuke had described. “There’s nothing here. It’s all in your head.”

“It is not,” he insisted. “It was the strictness of security that convinced me that Tokiwa must be a hostage here. Something is wrong at this temple.”

Kaname scowled. She knew this was just a part-time job, but she still felt responsibility as a miko. “Sousuke,” she gently admonished him, “this isn’t a temple, it’s a shrine.”

“It’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t. A shrine is a divine place, so you can’t say such awful things about it. You’ll end up cursed.”

“By the gods, do you mean?” he asked.

“Exactly,” she told him. “In particular, this shrine venerates Susano-o, God of War. You could end up bringing down the moon itself.”

“A moon with an orbit that unstable would have fallen long ago,” Sousuke observed.

Kaname rolled her eyes. “Fine, whatever, don’t listen to me. Just don’t cause any more trouble, okay? One more incident and I’m fired for sure.”

“But there really are traps—”

“Would you drop it already?!” she demanded. “The head priest here is a really good guy. He’s not a trap-setting weirdo like you!”

Just then, completely out of the blue, a man’s scream echoed out of the forest. They heard leaves being shaken off of trees and saw a young man in

a leather jacket fly up three meters into the canopy above. He was dangling from a tree, a rope around his ankle, the result of a clever trap set in the nearby forest.

“See? Like that one,” Sousuke said with utmost calm.

The man kept screaming as he swayed side to side like a pendulum.

Kaname watched for a moment, feeling stunned. Then she asked, “Did *you* set that one?!”

“No,” said Sousuke. “It was there when I arrived.”

“No way. So, who’s that guy?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s my son,” said the head priest, Hikawa, who had joined them at some point. “He majored in Shinto studies at Kokugakuin in hopes of taking over the business, but he fell in with a bad crowd and gave in to debauchery. He left home, dropped out of college, and now only occasionally comes by, trying to steal things he can sell off.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I’ve given him any number of lectures,” the high priest told them, “but he never listens. It’s been no end of trouble.”

“Hence the traps?” Kaname asked with a deflated air.

“Yes. Is that unusual?”

“No... I think it’s just fine,” she responded casually.

“Damn you, you stupid old geezer!” Hikawa’s delinquent son screamed and wept as he looked down at them. “Let me down from here! Don’t just watch like a smug asshole! You hear me, dammit?!”

Hikawa let his son’s abuse wash over him impassively. “Please, Katsuhiko,” he replied calmly. “It’s time you learned: no matter how many times you try, you will never steal the shrine’s treasure. Such blasphemy will only earn you divine retribution. Just like now!”

“That trap wasn’t divine!” the younger man howled. “It was you!”

“Pipe down, boy. New Year’s Eve is the perfect time for repentance. Leave your disorderly lifestyle behind and greet the new year as a new man.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“I think I’ll leave you there until your soul can be purified by the first dawn of the new year,” Hikawa decided.

“H-Hey!” The younger man tried to protest this treatment, but Hikawa

only turned away and left his son dangling in midair.

“Wait! Hikawa-san!” Kaname tried next. “You can’t really mean to leave your son like that, can you?”

“I certainly can,” he told her. “Don’t listen to anything he says, now.”

“But he’ll freeze overnight!” she protested.

“Which will be a good learning experience. If one little trap were enough to fix him, he’d have been fixed a long time ago,” the old priest said in a whisper. “Just forget him and go back to work. And as I’ve said many times, don’t enter the main building under any circumstances. Such disobedience could invite disaster, even for a sweet girl like you.” He said the last line with strangely severe tones.

Kaname couldn’t figure out why this man was so protective of the main shrine building. Did it contain some very valuable treasure? She admitted to being slightly curious but, intimidated by Hikawa’s attitude, she simply said, “All right. I won’t,” and nothing more.

Leaving the dangling prodigal son behind, Kaname and Sousuke went back to their work.

“But...” Sousuke said quietly.

“But what?”

“Which is the ‘main shrine building’ Hikawa told us not to enter?”

“It’s there, right in front of you.” Kaname pointed at a modest building with a gabled roof. Built of white cedar, it was about the size of a slightly upper-class suburban home.

Sousuke nodded meaningfully. “I see,” he said. “And that is where the shrine’s treasure is hidden?”

“Yeah... why do you ask?”

“The building contains an array of anti-theft devices as well, of a greater complexity than the ones in the forest,” Sousuke told her. “Multiple traps, activated by electronic sensors. Not quite cutting-edge, but even a professional would struggle with them.”

“What, in there? Really?” Kaname eyed the building suspiciously. It looked pretty normal to her, but Sousuke seemed to know better. “I think you’d have to be a psychic to know something like that...”

“No, merely observant. But what kind of treasure requires that degree of protection? I’m extremely interested to know,” he admitted. “There must be

more to it than mere monetary value. It could be something dangerous."

Kaname folded her arms thoughtfully. "Geh... Look, I'm curious too. But it can't be that big a deal, can it? Probably an old mirror, or a sword or something."

"A sword," Sousuke mused. "A weapon, then. Possible."

"A weapon?" Kaname scoffed. "Come on..."

"When I fought in Cambodia, guerrillas frequently stored weapons and ammunition in temples," Sousuke insisted. "If there's a powerful weapon stored here, as well... that would explain the strict security."

"It would not!"

"A small but powerful weapon of mass destruction... a chemical weapon, perhaps," he speculated. "Like a tank of VX gas, meant to be used as a last resort."

"What kind of Japanese shrine venerates a tank of poison gas?" Kaname muttered.

But Sousuke ignored her and said, with utmost seriousness, "I really should search inside. If I'm right, I'd like to retrieve it and send it to Mithril's Merida Island Base for disposal."

"Um..."

"It would be for the best," he insisted. "There's nothing more dangerous than religious fanatics with chemical weapons."

"The only dangerous thing here is the way you're talking," said Kaname, but greasy sweat was starting to rise on her forehead.

Ignoring her distress, Sousuke began to scrutinize the main temple building. He seemed determined to go in.

"Hey... wait a minute!" Kaname snapped back to her senses and shouted at Sousuke.

"What's wrong, Chidori?"

"The guy just told us *not* to go in!" she told him. "And there's no way a chemical weapon is in there!"

"But—"

"I said *no*!"

Cowed by Kaname's glare, Sousuke nodded hesitantly. "Ah... If you insist."

"Good. Now, stop thinking and get to work! Got it?" Kaname walked off.

Meanwhile, Sousuke did as he was told. First, he polished the stone monument near the main building with a rag. And when that was done...

“Hey, buddy.” Hikawa Katsuhiko, still dangling upside-down, called to Sousuke from the forest. “Mind lettin’ me down already? My leg hurts. I think it’s gonna come off. Please.”

Ignoring him, Sousuke focused on his cleaning.

“Hey, talk to me!”

Sousuke remained silent.

“You loyal to that old man just because he’s payin’ you? If so, you’re a real dumbass. That batty old bastard’s a total skinflint. You could make more at the local supermarket! And he *could* pay you more, he just doesn’t wanna. Hey, you hear me?”

Sousuke did hear him, but he still didn’t respond. He didn’t explain the fact that he wasn’t actually getting paid, either.

“His house and car are pieces of shit and he got his TV used twenty years ago. He’s a moron. He could afford a way better lifestyle if he sold that treasure in the main shrine building. So just ignore that old penny-pincher’s orders and—” It was at that moment that Sousuke turned back and looked up at Katsuhiko. “Oh? You comin’ around?”

“Actually, you mentioned the treasure in the main shrine building,” said Sousuke. “Do you know what’s in there?”

The hope in Katsuhiko’s eyes dimmed for a moment, but then he reconsidered. “Ah... yeah, I do!”

“What is it, then?”

“Well... Lemme down and I’ll tell you. Heh heh.”

Sousuke’s right hand was out in a flash. A knife tore through the air, cutting through the rope that held Katsuhiko up and letting him fall to the ground head first.

“Ah... ow!” He fell hard onto his back, limbs splayed out around him. As Sousuke swiftly approached him, Katsuhiko picked himself up, rubbing his aching back. “S-Some moves you got there...”

“I let you down,” Sousuke told him. “Now, talk.”

“The treasure, huh? It’s worth a ton. As for how much it’ll fetch... I dunno,” said Katsuhiko. “The old man says it’s off limits. Radioactive.”

“R... Radioactive?!” Sousuke froze up in terror.

“Yeah, so he won’t sell it. You think it’s weird too, huh?”

“Have... Have you seen it yourself?” Sousuke grabbed Katsuhiko’s shoulders, and his intensity left the other man a little dazed.

“Uh, I just caught a glimpse of it once... It looked kinda like a pot or a barrel... wrapped up in a sturdy sack. About this big.” Katsuhiko held his hands out to the width of two soccer balls.

Sousuke felt a chill run up his spine. “An SADM,” he whispered.

“A what?”

“It’s short for ‘Special Atomic Demolition Munition.’ It’s a miniature nuclear bomb that can be triggered remotely,” said Sousuke, speaking to himself in the tone of a narrator. “It only weighs about twenty kilograms, but its power is 4.5 kilotons... about half the payload used on Hiroshima.”

“Huh?” said Katsuhiko, “What are you talkin’ about?”

“There were rumors that during the 80s, US forces attempted to bury SADMs in East Germany, and a few went missing over the course of the operation,” Sousuke continued. “Perhaps one of them fell into the hands of the priest here somehow...”

“Uh. You okay, man?” asked Katsuhiko, waving a hand in front of Sousuke’s face.

Sousuke ignored it and peered cautiously at the main shrine building. “Do you know the layout of the main building?”

“A little,” Katsuhiko admitted. “But Dad’s got some pretty serious security installed. It’s not safe to get close.”

“I can take us through. Just show me where to go.”

Katsuhiko perked up at this. “Sure, glad to have you. How about a 70-30 split when we sell the treasure?”

Sousuke was about to tell him that selling it was out of the question, but quickly reconsidered; it would be better to play along for now, and after confirming that the treasure was really a nuclear bomb, to convince the other man then.

“Very well,” he said briefly. “One moment.” Sousuke left for a while, then returned with a backpack he’d previously stored in the shrine office. He withdrew from it a pair of multi-purpose goggles with a satellite datalink function, which he activated. “Let’s go.”

“S-Sure...” Katsuhiko agreed uneasily. Then the two men steeled their nerves and climbed over the fence into the shrine building.

“Hikawa-san. When should we have dinner?” Kaname asked, entering a room of the shrine office surrounded by bookshelves. The head priest, Hikawa, was writing names of worshipers on fuda.

“Oh? Ah, let’s have it a bit early,” he decided. “Something simple is fine.”

“Very well. Should I make some for your son?”

“No need.”

“But...”

Noticing Kaname’s reticence, Hikawa smiled. “I appreciate the concern, but there’s really no need. Just prepare dinner for four.”

“If you’re sure...” Kaname straightened up and looked at the framed picture on the desk. It was a black and white photo of a well-dressed couple in their forties, smiling. “Is that your wife?”

“Yes. It’s been fifteen years now since we lost her to cancer,” Hikawa said with a note of emotion. “Ever since, it’s just been me and my son in this shrine... and I didn’t know how to fill the mother’s role. I only knew how to scold him.”

“Ahh...” Kaname said tactfully.

“The way he’s turned out is my punishment for that. I don’t know why he’s so desperate to steal the shrine’s treasure, though.” Hikawa set down his brush and let out a long sigh.

“Speaking of the treasure... Is the main shrine building really filled with traps?” she asked next.

“Chidori-san, I told you not to go in there.” Hikawa glared dangerously at Kaname.

His intensity forced her to gulp slightly. “I-I wasn’t going to,” she told him hastily. “But So— er, Sagara-kun said he was interested, so... If it is, I’ll tell him to be careful...”

“I do have security devices installed inside, but as long as you stay *out*, it’ll be nothing to worry about. Do not approach the main shrine building under any circumstances. Is that understood?” he said firmly.

Kaname nodded. “O-Of course I won’t. I’ll go finish dinner, then. Excuse me.” She left the room quickly, pretending she didn’t feel his eyes boring holes in her back.

Hmm... it really is strange, Kaname thought. *Hikawa-san’s usually so friendly, but he becomes a different person when you mention the main*

shrine building. Sneaking in there might lose me more than just my job...

Her stomach dropped as she suddenly recalled how Sousuke had been acting before. She'd left him on his own for over an hour now. Deciding she should probably check in on him, Kaname left the shrine office building behind.

The main shrine building was, in fact, filled with security devices; there were invisible infrared lasers, pressure sensor floors, vibration detectors and high-sensitivity microphones. Intruders would be neutralized with tasers, wire net launchers, and tear gas. These were professional-grade devices, and they didn't run cheap.

This really isn't natural, thought Sousuke as he worked hard to deceive, deactivate, or evade each of the sensors in turn. He also marked the places he'd stepped with magic marker to make sure Katsuhiko could follow behind. "Don't step anywhere except the places I've marked," he urged him.

"R-Right," said Katsuhiko. "Got it."

Sousuke had messed with the systems' wiring as well, so there were now little holes all around the shrine's floor and walls. He'd considered interrogating the head priest directly about the nuke, but judged that to be the more dangerous option. If the man thought the jig was up, he might press a hidden remote detonator switch, and then...

That would be the end of it, Sousuke speculated grimly. He, as well as Kaname and Kyoko, would be instantly obliterated as the shrine grounds were reduced to a crater in the mountainside.

He had to defuse the detonator in secret before something awful happened.

Following Katsuhiko's guidance, Sousuke at last reached the building's innermost chamber. At the center of the sparse wooden floor sat two simple boxes: one was as tall as a child, and the other was quite a bit smaller.

"This is awesome... I've never made it this far!" Katsuhiko said in awe.

"Quiet," Sousuke ordered. "And if you have to breathe, breathe towards the entrance."

"How come?"

"There are sensors mounted behind the boxes, too. They're capable of detecting even the minor amounts of carbon dioxide emitted by humans."

“Crazy old man... thinks the world revolves around him,” Katsuhiko muttered.

Sousuke tugged at his sleeve again. “Which is the treasure in question?”

“The big one’s just got an ordinary rock inside, so it must be the small one.”

“Then we’ll open that one first,” said Sousuke, stepping over a knee-height laser. Katsuhiko followed and was about to step over it too, when...

“Sousuke! What are you doing?!” He suddenly heard Kaname shouting at him from behind. She was standing outside the main building, glaring at them through the entrance.

“Chidori!”

“Wah...” The surprised Katushiko lost his balance and ended up triggering the laser with his foot. “Damn...”

In that same instant, a black taser popped out of the ceiling. *Krrsht!* Its prongs sparked with electricity, which fired at Sousuke and Katsuhiko.

“Eek!” Katsuhiko collapsed, his hair standing on end. Sousuke reflexively leaped back to dodge the blast...

But that action, too, triggered one of the sensors. *Whump!* A wire net fired out of a gap in the wall. Sousuke couldn’t dodge this one, and ended up being pinned against the opposite wall. Sirens began wailing, as well.

“He told you not to come in here! I’m *so* fired now! This is all your fault!” Kaname cried, despite her surprise at the sight of the dangerous traps.

Sousuke, now held in place, replied, “Desperate times called for desperate measures.”

“What the hell kind of desperate times—”

“What’s going on here?” came the distant voice of Head Priest Hikawa. The sound of footfalls on gravel approached the shrine building.

“No...” Sousuke whispered. If he learned they were inside the building, Hikawa might trigger the nuke in desperation. Sousuke had to neutralize it before that could happen!

In that case... Sousuke made a decision. Despite his mostly immobilized state, he plucked a grenade from his chest pocket and pulled the pin with his mouth. “Chidori, I’m going to destroy the nuclear mine! Take Tokiwa and get as far away as you can!”

“Huh?”

“Destroying the external detonator will prevent a nuclear explosion, but the nuclear material will still contaminate the shrine grounds,” he yelled urgently. “You have to run!”

“Um... You’re not really making sense,” Kaname told him.

“Farewell, Chidori. I’m so glad to have known you.”

“Uh, much appreciated... Wait, what?”

Just then, Hikawa appeared at the door, his face tense and pale with fear. There was no more time to lose.

“Run! Now!” Sousuke shouted, throwing the grenade at the wooden box from across the room.

“Hey! What are you—” Kaname blanched, and Hikawa gasped...

Blam! The hand grenade’s explosion blew the box apart.

The weapon was destroyed. Sousuke closed his eyes, preparing for the incoming radiation. *In a life full of so much death and destruction*, he thought, *I’m just glad I could spend my last moments preventing a nuclear explosion.* Sousuke’s eyes remained closed for a while as he waited patiently for death, until...

“Hey!” said Kaname, poking at his head as he remained stuck to the wall.

Hikawa must have disabled the security devices, because he was now inside the room and helping his son to his feet.

“Why didn’t you run?” Sousuke asked. “The radiation from the nuclear material—”

Kaname poked him in the head again. “Nuclear material? Radiation? What are you talking about? And why’d you blow up the shrine’s precious treasure?!” She pointed at the destroyed wooden box. There was no sign of the remains of a nuclear mine, just a few old albums—scorched, battered, and full of holes.

“Is that the shrine treasure, then?” Sousuke asked.

“Eh? Huh...” Kaname approached the box in confusion and picked up one of the tattered albums.

Sousuke finally managed to extract himself from the net and curiously peered over Kaname’s shoulder at the album in her hand. The pictures within were of a young man with a pompadour and sunglasses, dressed in a Hawaiian shirt. One was of him in a provocative pose, standing with similarly-dressed comrades, all laughing at the camera. Some had them

piled into a sports car, bashing vending machines with steel pipes, peeing on signs that read ‘no public urination’...

“Dad... what is this?” asked Katsuhiko, who had apparently regained consciousness, as he looked at the albums from the side.

The old priest winced. “Well, I suppose the secret’s out now,” he lamented. “These are pictures from my youth. That’d be over thirty years ago now, of course.”

“That’s you, Hikawa-san?!” Kaname said in shock.

“Yes... I was reckless and foolish then,” the older man said. “I wanted to stick it to my father, so I hung out with a bad crowd. I was a hopeless hoodlum, but then I met my wife, and... Katsuhiko, when you were born, I resolved to go straight.”

“...”

“Are you surprised, my son? I wasn’t cut out to be a priest at first, either. But... that kind of lifestyle can’t continue on forever. People get old, if they don’t die before they get there. There’s more to living than money and expensive things... I’d hoped to show you these albums when you came to that realization yourself, but...”

“D-Dad...”

“Do you understand a bit of how I feel now?”

“Yeah. I... I had no idea,” Katsuhiko admitted.

“Yes, yes...” The old man patted his son’s shoulder lightly. There was a new warmth between the two of them now. But...

“Wait a minute,” Kaname muttered.

“What is it, Chidori-san?”

“Look, I’m sorry to interrupt the heartwarming wrap-up, but why are there picture albums in the shrine’s treasure box?” she asked. “What’s the real treasure?”

“Ahh. The original treasure was a hand drum passed down from the Muromachi era, but...”

“*Was*?”

Hikawa gazed into the distance. “I sold it because I needed money.”

Kaname collapsed with a thump, which sent the beat-up picture album flying.

“I initially installed the security system to protect the shrine treasure... but I got a little obsessed with it,” Hikawa admitted. “I ended up racking up

some serious bills.”

Sousuke nodded along in perfect understanding.

“I didn’t have a choice, so I sold the drum. But I didn’t like leaving the box empty, so I put something inside I didn’t want anyone to see anyway. I mean, since we had the security measures in place.”

“H-Hikawa-san... Have you ever heard of ‘missing the forest for the trees’?”

“I have. What about it?”

Kaname sighed and slumped over limply.

Sousuke patted her shoulder. “It all worked out, Chidori. It wasn’t a nuclear bomb after all.”

“And I’m closer to my dad than ever before,” Katsuhiko pointed out.

“Yes, and now that my secret is out there, it’s like a weight has dropped from my shoulders,” Hikawa told her brightly. “Isn’t it funny, the way life can be?”

Father and son smiled happily. Sousuke nodded in agreement. The three of them each seemed satisfied in their own way.

“You... You’re all blasphemers...” Kaname alone just stood there, eyes downcast, trembling in a mixture of rage and disappointment.

The War Cry of Overkill

“What... What exactly did we do wrong?” the student asked, sounding like he might start crying any minute. He was a big, burly man despite his pitiful tone. As he pleaded with the middle-aged woman sitting across the desk from him, his broad chest seemed like it might bust out of its uniform. “Madame Principal,” he said, “Our club has been operating in earnest all this time. Please believe me. It’s true.”

“I am aware,” the principal said sternly.

“So why are you closing us down? We’ve never caused any trouble for anyone,” the student protested. “We do repairs to the club building, tend the athletic fields, look after the cute little bunny rabbits...”

“I am aware.”

“We play with local children, pay visits to lonely senior citizens...”

“All admirable acts,” the principal acknowledged.

“And we serve the community in many, many ways. So why are you doing this? What did we do wrong?” he asked pleadingly.

“You want to know? I’ll tell you,” the principal said with a long sigh. “We’re shutting you down... because you are the *rugby club*.”

•

It was a quiet afternoon in the student council room. The vice president, Chidori Kaname, rested her chin in her hands and gazed blankly at slightly outdated LCD television. She was wearing her usual student uniform, with her waist-length hair fastened at the end with a red ribbon, and watching an old youth drama. Young men stood on a sunset beach, their eyes wet with tears, their hairstyles as cringe-inducing as could be. They were all dressed in rugby uniforms.

“Sir!” cried one of the young men to the inspiring teacher standing before him. “We were wrong! You really did care about us all this time... Please forgive us.”

The inspiring teacher nodded firmly. “It’s all right. I’m just glad you understand now. That’s all I ever wanted.”

“S-Sir!”

The young teacher patted the shoulder of the now openly crying student. “It’ll be all right. I know you guys. And I know you’ll win that match tomorrow!”

“But, sir...!”

“Don’t lose heart,” the teacher told him sternly. “Now, race each other... into the setting sun!”

“Y-Yes, sir!!!”

For no apparent reason, the young people suddenly took off down the beach, heading away from the camera, and then...

To be continued. The episode’s ending segued into a commercial for Nagatani-en Mabo Harusame noodles, starring Wada Akiko.

“Hmm... strong plotting,” Kaname muttered, folding her arms thoughtfully as if she was analyzing a piece of auteur cinema by the likes of Oliver Stone or Spike Lee. “A story about misfits who win the championship. The classic trio—effort, friendship, victory. That’s how the sports underdog genre should be,” she concluded in a self-satisfied tone.

Sagara Sousuke, who was silently reading in a nearby chair, looked up at her in confusion. “I don’t understand,” he said, with his usually sullen expression. “Is it that entertaining to watch the incompetent succeed?”

It was an absurdly blunt way of putting it. But then, Sousuke had grown up in war-torn regions overseas and still didn’t have much knowledge about everyday life in Japan. It was only natural for him to be unfamiliar with the tropes of the underdog narrative.

Still, Kaname felt a little indignant. “It certainly is,” she insisted. “If someone’s bad at what they do but charismatic and willing to work hard, you want to see them succeed. It’s human nature.”

“Hmm...” Sousuke mused, looking down at the novel in his hand. “Perhaps that is the national character.”

“What are you talking about?” Kaname squinted suspiciously at the book in Sousuke hands. It was a novel entitled *Great Turnaround! The Silent Pacific War.* She found herself lost for words.

“The first-year who provides our equipment recommended it,” Sousuke told her. “The genre is called ‘alternate history fiction.’ It’s a story of Japan

somehow beating the United States in the Second World War."

"Not sure I'd call that an underdog story..." Kaname muttered.

"But the weaker side wins," Sousuke pointed out.

"Uh, sure, but—"

Before they could finish their debate, the door to the room opened wide and the student council president, Hayashimizu Atsunobu, entered. He was tall and slender with slicked-back hair, wireframe glasses, and a quiet air of authority about him.

"Hmm. Did I leave you waiting?" Hayashimizu asked, looking at Kaname and Sousuke.

"Yes, actually," said Kaname. "Where'd you run off to after calling us in here?"

"The principal's office. I was negotiating," he said casually, slapping the bundle of papers that he'd been carrying under one arm down onto his desk. Then he sat down smoothly. Once seated, Hayashimizu broached the subject at hand. "I'll tell you why I called you here," he began. "It's about our rugby club."

"Um, we have a rugby club?"

"We do, although few people are aware of it."

"Huh..." Kaname said, as wonderingly as if she'd just been told of a hidden tribe of headhunters in the Chinese countryside. "So, has the rugby club done something wrong?"

"They have. You see..." Hayashimizu went on to explain the situation.

The rugby club at Jindai High was small and weak. They'd existed for fifty years, and twenty years ago they'd almost made it to the championships. But they hadn't won a single match in the past ten years. They were performing so poorly and showing so little competitiveness that last week, the teachers had decided to shut down the club.

"However, this act is a clear breach of the student council's self-regulatory authority," Hayashimizu said. "While I do believe the teachers have a point, I would like to avoid closing the club in this way. And so, I proposed a condition to the principal."

"What's the condition?"

"The rugby club has a match scheduled, next week, against the powerful Garasuyama High team. If they win, we'll delay the club's dissolution by one year. If they lose, they'll be gone on the spot."

“I see,” said Kaname. “Any chance they’ll win?”

“None. Their loss is all but inevitable,” Hayashimizu told her breezily. “Jindai is 0 for 49 in their most recent matches against Garasuyama. Additionally, there are only fourteen members in the club, and a rugby team requires fifteen players.”

“...That’s not much of a chance you’re giving them,” Kaname pointed out.

“Chances are not to be given,” Hayashimizu lectured, “they’re to be seized. How they approach the offer is up to them.”

“Well, I guess, but—”

“Still, I’d like to lend them a helping hand. I’ve decided to send a fill-in player and manager from the student council’s executive arm to aid them.”

“Huh?” Kaname’s eyes went wide.

“Didn’t you hear me? A fill-in player—” he pointed at Sousuke, “—and a manager,” he pointed at Kaname.

Kaname stared blankly at Hayashimizu’s index finger, and a few seconds later snapped back to her senses. “Why should we do that?!” she argued, rising from her chair.

Perhaps anticipating this reaction, Hayashimizu nodded knowingly. “I’m afraid I can’t see to it myself,” he confessed. “Starting tomorrow, I must lead the summit of the Tajiren, the Tama Regional High School Government Conference. It’s an extremely boring five-day meeting. Although, you could attend that in my stead if you preferred.”

“Geh...” She’d sat in on one of those meetings before and knew what a waste of time they were. All they did was go on and on about dull topics, like how to prevent teenage smoking. The thought of actually having to lead one...!

Having made her decision, Kaname decided to speak up. “All right,” she said grudgingly. “Darn it... By the way, Sousuke. Aren’t you against this?”

“No. I owe the president a great deal already,” Sousuke responded indifferently.

“Thank you, Sagara-kun,” said Hayashimizu.

“Not at all. It’s easily done.”

There was a curious relationship of trust between the two eccentrics. It wasn’t some sentimental idea of friendship or bonds. If pressed to give it a label, she’d call it a kind of sympathy; a mutual respect shared between two

people who excelled in their respective fields, in a way that surpassed simple self-interest. Kaname idly considered how rarely you saw a relationship like that between women.

“If you two would head to the rugby club room now, then?” Hayashimizu suggested. “And Chidori-kun... take this with you.” He pulled a large golden kettle from under the desk.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“A necessity for all female managers,” he told her.

Kaname found herself speechless.

“And one other thing. Although I find your legs to be aesthetically beautiful...” Hayashimizu folded his arms and looked Kaname’s legs up and down. His gaze wasn’t lecherous; rather, it was more as if he was expressing disapproval for something that was out of place.

“Wh-What?” Kaname said, unconsciously tugging at her skirt.

“Your skirt is too short,” he said reprovingly. “A manager’s skirt should always be below her knees.”

“Isn’t that discrimination?”

“It’s not discrimination,” he told her, “It’s scrupulous attention to detail. When you grow up, you’ll understand.”

“Um, I think I’d rather not ever understand...” Kaname said, then stood up.

Kaname borrowed a longer skirt from the home economics club. She changed quickly, then headed for the athletics section of the club building with the kettle in hand.

“Chidori. Are you familiar with the sport of rugby?” Sousuke asked as they walked side by side.

Kaname tilted her head a bit. “Not really,” she admitted. “About all I know is it’s sweaty guys covered in mud, grappling and such.”

“Like martial arts, then?”

“No, there’s a ball involved, I think. But... Yech, I just hate this,” she said, looking openly disgusted.

Sousuke frowned as he watched her. “Why are you so upset? Have you been captured and tortured by rugby players in the past?”

“They’re not the secret police, sheesh... but I guess a war-addled fool like you probably wouldn’t know. I just kind of... expect it to stink.”

Kaname had her own prejudice—a mostly correct one—that rugby was played by sweaty, stinky men. “A bunch of big, burly dudes packed into a filthy little room... I feel like I’ll get pregnant just being around them.”

“Is that what it’s like?”

“Mmhmm. That’s what it’s like,” Kaname confirmed as she stepped in front of the rugby club room door, which was situated in a corner of the club building. After a moment’s hesitation, she knocked.

“Yes?” came a rather polite voice from beyond the door.

“Um, excuse me,” she called back. “We’re here from the student council. We were asked to help you with your practice.”

“Ah... thank you for coming.” The door opened and a large student appeared. He was big and burly, but conspicuously well-groomed. “Chidori-san and Sagara-san, was it? Hayashimizu-senpai told me about you. You’re here to help us, aren’t you? We’re very grateful.”

“Oh, well...”

“I’m looking forward to working with you to beat Garasuyama... Ah, forgive the late introduction. I’m the club president, Goda Yu. It’s a real pleasure.” With that, Goda Yu beckoned them inside. “Step right in,” he invited them. “I’m sorry it’s such a mess...”

“Er...” Kaname was once again speechless, because despite Goda’s words, the room was sparkling. Every inch of it was clean and tidy. There were fine-grained wood furnishings, rattan furniture, and several potted plants. Multiple picture postcards were hung up on the wall, scattered about in a tasteful way. The lighting was gentle and calming.

Several club members sat around the spotless table, giving amicable smiles to Kaname and Sousuke.

“Um, is this really the rugby club?” she asked.

“It certainly is,” Goda said solicitously. “Why do you ask?”

“Well...” Kaname trailed off. She thought to herself, *where are the mud-stained striped jerseys? The sweaty guys? Why does the room smell faintly of lavender?*

“Please, have a seat. May I get you some tea? We have an herbal that’s heaven for stiff muscles and aching backs.”

“Um...”

“And we just sent one of our boys to pick up something from the Cozy Corner by the station,” Goda gushed. “Their chocolate gâteau is divine.

Isn’t it, everyone?”

“Absolutely!”

“Ah, I can’t wait!” The rugby players nodded, grinning ear to ear.

As Kaname sat down, still a little numb, Sousuke nudged her from the side. “It seems like a fine place to me,” he observed.

“You’re not wrong there, but...”

“Rugby must be a very peaceful sport.”

“Something’s not right here,” said Kaname.

“Ah!” Goda was engaged in making their tea when he suddenly let out a cry.

Sousuke heard the reaction, drew his pistol, and automatically dove into action. Kaname lithely passed in front of him, and suddenly, Sousuke was soaring aimlessly through the air. He collided with a poinsettia head-first, and then fell silent.

“Oh, that was a close call,” said Goda, sounding alarmed. “Are you all right?”

“Be careful,” said one of the other club members, peering in concern at the smoke rising from Sousuke’s head. “We don’t want anyone getting hurt here.”

Meanwhile, Kaname—acting as if nothing unusual had just occurred—said, “What happened, Goda-kun?”

“Oh, nothing... I saw a spider and it startled me!”

Indeed, a spider about the size of a pinkie nail was crawling busily up the wall nearby. Kaname stared at it, dumbstruck.

“Wh-What should I do, Chidori-san?” Goda asked tremulously, wringing his hands. “I’d be scared to leave it at large in here, but I’d hate to kill the poor thing...”

“You guys really are in bad shape, huh?” Kaname let out a deep sigh.

The next day, they began their practice for the upcoming match against Garasuyama. The wussy-ness of the Jindai High rugby club was so strikingly singular that it could have been covered by the World Heritage Convention: the fourteen club members were uniformly big guys with strong legs, and they seemed sturdy enough... but they were simply too timid.

The team members carefully locked the door when they were changing.

They cradled the ball like a newborn baby. Just before practice, they walked all over the athletic field and removed any rock larger than five millimeters in diameter, just in case someone might trip. They always called to each other multiple times before each pass, to make doubly sure no one got hit in the face with a ball. And as for tackling practice... apparently, that was out of the question.

“But why?” Kaname asked Goda, as the sun set over the field.

“Well, it’s quite dangerous, isn’t it? To jump on another person while they’re running,” Goda responded reasonably enough.

“This crap is why you guys never get any better!” Kaname shouted, her patience at its limit. She swung her fan and kettle around as she laid into them angrily.

Goda immediately looked to be on the verge of tears. “R-Really, there’s no need for yelling,” he protested. “This is simply how we’ve always done things.”

“And that’s why you’ve always lost!” Kaname exploded. “You guys have *gotta* get it together! Are you men or not?”

The rugby players shared a glance.

“What a horrible thing to imply, Chidori-san,” one member said disapprovingly.

“Exactly,” said another. “We live in the era of sexual equality.”

“Assigning gendered qualities to behavior is what leads to unjust discrimination,” they insisted.

“Th-These guys...” Kaname began to tremble. “Hey, Sousuke! Say something to them!” she shouted at Sousuke, who was in a corner of the field studying the rules. His textbook was the manga *Chotto Yoroshiku!* by Yoshida Satoshi.

“Mm-hmm. Play safe out there!” he replied, his eyes still locked on the comic as he took a bite of his fruit-flavored Calorie Mate.

“Oh, for the love of... Look, there’s just a week until the match!” Kaname yelled. “If you lose to Garasuyama, your club’s kaput. Are you okay with that?”

“W-Well...” Goda stammered. “I don’t want the club to be dissolved, obviously. But I also don’t want to hurt anyone...”

“It’s not about *hurting people*, it’s about *winning*! Your club’s existence is on the line here, so you’ve gotta pull it together! Practice! Practice your damned hearts out!” Kaname scolded. Then she banged her fan against her kettle, dutifully playing her role to the hilt.

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” he agreed shakily. “All right, fellows, let’s practice our scrum!”

“Very well!”

Given how big the guys were, it was smart thinking to work on their scrum, where strength was what mattered most. But...

The rugby players gathered in a corner of the pitch and circled up. Then they all looked down, folded their arms in front of their chests, and quietly closed their eyes. As Kaname watched them suspiciously, Goda began to speak. There was a solemn air about them. It lasted about three minutes, until...

“Um... What are you doing?” Kaname asked hesitantly, causing the silent group to suddenly all look up.

“We were praying to God to let us finish our scrum practice in safety. It’s far too nerve-wracking not to,” Goda responded sincerely.

They were in the shopping district after sundown, having entered a hamburger restaurant as a group.

“This is totally hopeless,” Kaname grumbled unhappily.

The rugby players sank despondently in their seats. “B-But... We really are doing the best we can,” Goda replied weakly.

“Your ‘best’ makes a koala look like a daredevil,” Kaname declared

scornfully. “Don’t you guys have any fighting spirit? You look more like a support group than a sports team.”

“What an awful thing to say,” someone muttered. “And koalas are far fiercer than they seem, you know.”

“I don’t give a damn,” she told them flatly.

“B-But...”

“Don’t argue! *Prove* it with your actions!” Kaname stood up and pointed at Sousuke, who was sitting in the corner, silently reading his comic. “Look at that,” she told them hotly. “He’s hard at work memorizing the rules! He’s doing absolutely everything he can, even if it pains him! Right, Sousuke?!”

Sousuke kept his eyes on his comic. “Mm. This is very good,” he said, sucking up some of his medium-sized cola through a straw.

Kaname fell silent.

“He looks fairly content to me,” Goda muttered rebelliously.

“Guess he’s got his own priorities this time,” Kaname sighed, slumping over as she sat back down.

“Bwa... ha ha ha!”

“Hya ha ha ha!”

“Gwa ha ha!”

A chorus of laughter rang out. Kaname and the others turned to see a group of big men in the smoking section some distance away, pointing at them and laughing. Some had scarred faces, and some were missing front teeth. There were about ten of them in total, all dressed in slovenly, worn looking blazer-style uniform jackets.

“Who are they?” Kaname asked.

“Th-That’s... Garasuyama High’s rugby team,” Goda admitted.

“That’s them? Wow, they look tough...” Kaname looked on in open admiration as the Garasuyama High boys got up and moved to surround the Jindai team.

A man with a crew cut, who appeared to be the leader, leered down at Kaname. “Hey, girlie,” he said. “These losers ain’t gonna listen to you, y’know? Once a spineless worm, always a spineless worm.”

This was the part where she should have said, ‘That’s not true!’ but instead...

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” she agreed..

“We’ve had to practice with ’em since the days when we were both great

teams, and now it’s just lame,” the leader said. “Know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I can imagine.”

“But next week, it’s all over,” he predicted. “We’ll beat the snot outta these assholes and put the whole lousy business behind us.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Kaname.

“I mean, trash is trash to the end, right? Wa ha ha!”

“Ha ha ha,” said Kaname, sharing a hearty laugh with the men.

Goda and the others grew visibly smaller under this treatment. Some of them were even on the verge of tears (although Sousuke continued reading his comic).

“You seem like a pretty savvy girl,” the leader observed.

“Nah, I’ve just got... you know, eyes.”

“You seem cool. Wanna ditch these bozos and hang with us instead?”

“Nah,” Kaname responded lightly, still smiling.

“C’mon, try us out,” the crew cut guy said invitingly, putting his arm around Kaname’s shoulders. “I know a great karaoke place. We’ll show you a good time.”

“Ah. Um...”

“Don’t be so uptight. C’mon!”

Not even Kaname could take this lying down. “Could you please remove your hand?” she told him icily. “I’m not a zoologist like Masanori Hata, and I don’t make time with gorillas.”

“Gorillas?” the crew cut guy blinked in shock. “You talkin’ about me?”

“Yeah. I’d heard they were on the verge of extinction in Rwanda due to the civil war,” said Kaname. “It’s a relief to find them still proliferating here! Aha ha.”

“Wah... wa ha ha.”

“Ha ha ha.”

Kaname and the gorillas shared another hearty laugh. Then there was a moment of silence, and...

“You bitch!” roared the crew cut guy. But just as he was about to twist Kaname’s arm, a tray went flying through the air at high speed, a corner of which hit the man’s temple with a bang. “Geh...” The massive man staggered for a moment, then collapsed.

“We’re having a meeting. Go away,” said Sousuke, the source of the throw.

“Y-You wanna do this?!” asked the members of the Garasuyama rugby team, who all immediately took on fighting postures.

Sousuke reached for the holster on his hip.

Kaname screamed immediately, “No guns!”

Sousuke froze, as Goda and the others shrank down. Then the men charged them and a battle broke out.

Five minutes later...

“Yeah, we can’t wait! And you better not run away, got it?!” the Garasuyama High boys jeered as they left the hamburger restaurant. Half of them were staggering, the other half striding proudly. The defining difference between the two groups was that the latter half had gone after the rugby players, and the former half had taken a beating from an unarmed Sousuke.

The result was, technically, a draw... but Goda and the rest of the team were still in a bad way. The only ones standing at the end were Kaname, who’d spent her time running around to try and stay out of the fray, and Sousuke himself.

“That was funny but terrifying,” Kaname said, shoulders heaving.

Sousuke looked at her with concern. “You weren’t hurt, Chidori?”

“No, I’m fine.” she responded breezily, smoothly moving away as she realized she was clinging to Sousuke. “But boy, what a bunch of jerks... Can’t even take a little teasing. You guys okay?” Kaname checked worriedly on Goda and the other boys lying on the floor.

“What... What did we do wrong?!” Goda asked in a high-pitched whine. “Those Garasuyama High rugby boys are so mean! We’ve done everything we can to make peace with them, but... but they keep beating the heck out of us!”

“Could you at least say ‘beating the hell out of us’?” Kaname suggested.

“Chidori-san,” Goda said. “I feel, for the first time, that the situation is untenable. I can’t let this be the end of it. I truly want to beat them!”

“A-Agreed,” someone else agreed. “I can’t stand it either.”

“I wanna win...” another sniffed.

“I don’t wanna lose our club...” a third sobbed.

The players, their faces stained with blood and tears, were in agreement with Goda.

At least they're ready to put in the work, Kaname thought. *But how are guys like these gonna beat those violent jerks?*

Just then...

"Do you want to win that badly?" Sousuke asked.

"O-Of course... We're human, too."

"Do you really want to win?" he pressed.

"Yes. If we don't... If we don't..." Goda sniffled.

Sousuke turned around and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll train you, then."

Four days later they were on Mt. Takamaru, in Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park, located on the border between Tokyo and Yamanashi Prefecture. It was a Sunday. They were in a heavy pine forest that ran along a treacherous slope, with no signs of human structure other than a few uncertain pathways leading up the mountain. Spring was still a ways away, and the air was cold.

"Kana-chan... are you sure this is the right way?" Kaname's friend, Tokiwa Kyoko, whispered wearily. She had braids and coke-bottle glasses, and wore a down jacket and hiking boots.

"I think so. I think we're close," responded Kaname, who was also dressed for hiking. She was holding a portable digital GPS map that she'd borrowed from Sousuke.

"How are they training on a mountain like this? There's no place you could even throw a ball around," Kyoko observed.

"You're right," said Kaname. "They're skipping school, too. I don't know what he's thinking..."

Sousuke and the other rugby club members had come to this mountain for a training camp three days earlier. Kaname had taken a pass on the training, but since it was Sunday, she'd come to check in on them.

Just then, a barking voice pierced the quiet of the forest. "You filthy maggots! Get those knees up! I said *run*!"

"Ah..." said Kaname. She could see Goda and the other rugby players stumbling through the trees with giant logs in their arms, dressed in fatigues.

"Look at you! Trash! I've seen worms I liked more! I've got more respect for the blood-sucking tick I pulled off my ass!" Sousuke screamed

abusively at them. He was likewise dressed in fatigues as he ran along with the rugby players, holding a memo pad in one hand.

“Hahh... hahh...”

“I’m... gonna die...”

The players’ faces were stained with mud and sweat, twisted in fear and exhaustion.

“Listen up, ********! The more you suffer, the more I get my rocks off! Don’t just stand there swaying like some old man’s grimy ********?! You ****ing pieces of warmed-over ****! If you ever wanna get some ***** for those ********s of yours you better show me you can **** some ***** in the ****! You ****-slinging ********!” shouted Sousuke, mechanically reciting from his ‘indispensable phrases for training,’ eyes locked on the notepad onto which they’d been written.

Kaname and Kyoko were too stunned to react for a moment, then they both turned red.

“Sagara-kun’s such a potty mouth...” Kyoko said before trailing off.

“You think he even knows what he’s saying?” Kaname asked.

Right then, one of the rugby players collapsed. He dropped his log and fell onto the cold ground below. “I c-can’t take it anymore...” he said weakly.

Sousuke strode up to the man, who was lying there on all fours. “What’s the matter, Ishihara?” he jeered. “Giving up already?”

The man just panted and wheezed in response.

“I can see you’re every bit the pantywaist I thought you were,” he said dismissively. “Go home and cry to a picture of your precious H*ros*e Ry*ko!”

“Geh...”

“She’s definitely the kind of loose whore idol a coward like you would fall for. You hopeless little shitstain!” Sousuke’s borrowed words caused the player’s eyes to open wide.

“D-Don’t you badmouth H*ros*e!” As the man lunged at Sousuke, tears in his eyes, Sousuke stuck out a foot to trip him. “Grrk!”

“How many times must I say it? H*ros*e Ry*ko is a whore,” Sousuke enunciated. “If I’m wrong, prove it to me! Pick up that log and give me another ten laps!”

“D-Dammit!” The man must have really loved that idol because, despite

the tears in his eyes, he started crawling towards the fallen log.

The rest of the club members were desperately running up the sharp slope. Sousuke watched them go with a glint in his eye, then walked up to Kaname and Kyoko. “You two. You found your way?” he said, suddenly back to his usual calm.

“Yeah. But... what was with that trash-talking? What’s with that notebook? Let me see it.” Kaname snatched the notebook he was carrying. It was scrawled all over with curse words, labeled *Big Sister Mao’s Marine Trash-Talking Notebook (For training new recruits/To be shouted with all your heart).*

“...What in the world is she...”

“It’s not an issue,” Sousuke told her.

“You really think this’ll work, though?” Kaname asked doubtfully.

“The exertion will bring them confidence,” Sousuke predicted. “The core of their weakness has nothing to do with skill.”

“Ah, you might be right... Say, are you hungry? Kyoko and I made rice balls.”

“Yeah, we made plenty. There’s okaka and salmon and umeboshi and...” Kyoko pulled some foil-wrapped parcels out of her pack one after another, her voice cheerful.

But Sousuke just scowled at them. “Hmm...”

“What’s up, Sousuke?” Kaname asked. “You already had lunch?”

“No... I’m thinking over whether it’s all right to give them a decent meal,” he admitted.

“Oh, come on. We got up early to make these! You can’t just turn them down now.”

“Hm, I suppose.” Sousuke nodded reluctantly. Then he shouted at the rugby players running up and down the slope, “Rejoice, you disgusting pigs! Your manager’s brought food! Your first meal in thirty-two hours! Once you finish, you can eat!”

The players paused a moment. Then, eyes shining, they began running with the sudden vigor of a pack of wild boars.

“Thirty-two hours?!” Kaname and Kyoko said in chorus, eyes wide.

“Yes,” said Sousuke. “But do you think perhaps I *should* starve them a while longer?”

It was the day of the match, on the Setagaya rugby pitch. The sky above was cloudy and gray, threatening rain at any minute. Unseasonable lightning rumbled in the distance.

The Garasuyama rugby team was lined up on the pitch, wearing all-black uniforms reminiscent of New Zealand's powerful national team. The Jindai High team was nowhere to be seen. Kyoko and Kaname, standing off in a corner, were the only ones present.

"Heh. Think they chickened out?" the gorilla man said. The men standing around him cackled in response.

"Eh... doubt it, but..." Kaname mused.

"Ah, Kana-chan, they're here!" said Kyoko.

Fifteen men appeared at the entrance to the pitch: Sousuke, Goda, and the rest of the Jindai High team. Covered in mud and fresh wounds, they seemed to have come straight from the mountain.

"Sorry for the wait," said Sousuke, standing at the head of the team, as he dropped a large backpack onto the ground.

Goda and the others were silent. They looked exhausted, yet their eyes glinted with the light of determination. They were standing tall and glaring over the grounds.

"Um, Goda-kun," said Kaname. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he returned stoically, "I'm doin' just fine."

"'Yeah?' '*Doin'*'?" Kaname echoed incredulously, staring at him in shock as her team approached the Garasuyama High players.

"So ya came, eh?" said the gorilla man. "Better get ready. After today, your club's kaput. So, no big deal if we send you all to the hospital, huh?"

Goda didn't respond.

"We're breakin' every arm in the place," the gorilla man said again. "Cry and scream all you like, 'cause the pain train ain't gonna stop. Got it?"

Goda and the others didn't look a little bit afraid. They just stood tall, glaring at the other team.

"Get ready!" the referee shouted, and the Garasuyama players moved to their own half of the field.

"All right. Let's prepare for battle," Sousuke said, and the group cast off their fatigues. Beneath them were sparkling new uniforms, featuring the crest of Jindai High sitting proud on the jerseys' red-and-white-striped chests. The men formed a perfect line and stood at attention while Sousuke

met them in a matching uniform. “You little maggots lived to see this day,” he bellowed. “You’re rugger men now!”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” Goda and the others responded with a shout so intense it could have cracked the ground below.

“Now, your greatest trial awaits! There’s no turning back! You stand between having everything you’ve ever wanted, and falling into the pits of hell. Well? Does that sound fun to you?!” Sousuke yelled.

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now...” Sousuke nodded firmly and stood very still. Then, after a moment, he shouted again. “All right, maggots! What do you do?!”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

“What are you here for?!”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

“Do you love our school? Do you love the rugby club?! Well, you stupid bastards?!” Sousuke shouted.

“Gung-ho! Gung-ho! Gung-ho!”

“Okay! Then let’s get out there!”

Kyoko and Kaname could do nothing but watch, stunned into silence, as the Jindai High rugby club charged onto the field.

“This is some wicked brainwashing,” Kyoko said quietly.

“Yeah, but... does Sousuke even understand the rules?” Kaname asked.

Her fears would soon prove to be entirely justified.

The match began. As the ball flew out of the scrum, Goda scooped it up and passed it to Sousuke. Immediately, the Garasuyama forward line charged.

“Die!” said the gorilla-man, at the head of the group. He charged like a heavy tank, brimming with open malice.

“Sergeant, punt!”

“What does that mean?” Sousuke asked.

“It means kick! Kick!”

“Roger,” said Sousuke. The next instant he was in the air, where he hung like Ushiwakamaru or Crying Freeman until...

Crash! Sousuke’s dropkick hit the gorilla man in the face. The man reeled backwards, tottered a step or two... then collapsed on the field, his

body twisted and twitching.

“Who’s next? Try me,” Sousuke whispered boldly.

Kaname charged forward and applied her fan to his head in the same instant the judge shouted that he was out of the game. Then she dragged Sousuke off of the field, which was wreathed in silence.

But after a moment, Goda shouted in a crazed voice. “Rrr... Rrrragh! The sergeant showed us how to do it! C’mon, you bastards, let’s keep it going!”

“Yeah!” cried the Jindai team, and the very air trembled at their cry.

Garasuyama’s players turned pale and began to back away.

ハァ
……

There is a Chinese saying—shā yī jǐng bǎi—which translates into “kill one to warn a hundred.” In other words, the heartless execution of one man would steal away the morale of a hundred more. Sousuke’s aggressive act had the same result: the remaining Garasuyama players were terrified.

Goda and the others now played as wolves hunting down the cowering rabbits. They weren’t here to die in the name of victory—instead, they were here to kill. Their bloodlust was so strong that when one of them crushed another player with a tackle and noticed that he was breathing, he spat out the words, “Shit, he’s still alive.”

After Sousuke, four more players were disqualified for malicious rule violations, but the other team lost twice that many to injuries. Garasuyama was so intimidated by them that they couldn’t even land their penalty kicks.

Sixty minutes later, the match was over... and the Jindai High rugby club had won a resounding victory.

“I’ve never seen such a cruel and heartless event,” the referee would reminisce later. The Garasuyama High team—previously perpetual winners—would never recover from the shock, and went into a deep slump thereafter. The match itself would come to be referred to as the Nightmare of Futako-Tamagawa, and Jindai High would become the terror of the high school rugby world for years to come.

“But is this really an okay outcome?” Kaname whispered, as Goda and the others howled savagely in victory. “A week ago, they were saying they didn’t want to hurt anyone... It’s a little sad, actually.”

“Yes,” Sousuke nodded. “Battle is always an empty pursuit. That’s what their sacrifice has taught me.”

“You... don’t you dare put a moral on this!” said Kaname, whacking Sousuke over the head.

Meanwhile, Goda and the others fell on the cowering losing team. “You done already, assholes?! Get up and fight us one more time! Show us your guts, you **********! You got a little **** on your ****?! You don’t like it?! You don’t like it, you can **** my **** and call it—”

Single-Minded Strikeout

She stood alone in an empty room, basketballs lying untidied on the floor. Beat-up old tennis shoes hung in an otherwise empty locker. The middle school graduation ceremony was over.

His locker. Senpai's locker.

Senpai, who just graduated... who'll be going to a distant high school starting in April...

What in the world am I doing? she thought, staring into space. *Senpai won't be coming back here. He'll be walking out the school gate around now, surrounded by his fellow graduates and horde of fangirls. A place I'd never be welcome.*

In the end, she'd never been able to say anything to him. Not "Congratulations." Not "Thank you for everything you did for me." Not even "I love you." She traced her fingers along the locker and sighed. *I should just go*, she was thinking... When just then, the door opened, and he was there.

"Senpai?" she asked, breathlessly.

"I thought you'd be here," he said with a smile. "I knew you'd pick a place no one else would be. You're a little perverse like that, Chidori."

"W-Well, excuse me! I guess perverse and unpleasant is just who I am!" She turned to him with a pout. She always acted this way around him.

"But I'm glad you're still here," he continued. "I really wanted to see you before I left."

"What?" she asked in surprise.

His expression suddenly became awkward. "Is that strange?"

"No... not really. It's not... *very* strange." A long silence fell. Despite the fact that, just minutes ago, she'd felt like she'd had so much to say, her mind was suddenly blank. "S-Senpai?"

"Y-Yes?"

"I... Senpai, I really..." She couldn't say it. She didn't have the courage. In the end, she ran away. Putting on a suddenly cheerful voice, she spoke,

trying to dismiss the awkwardness, “...I w-want to take a photo. For the occasion. I’ve got a camera.”

“Ah... sure thing,” he agreed.

“Okay... Here, then.” She put the camera on top of a desk and set the timer, then she ran to his side and stood there.

The camera’s flash lit up. They separated, and then as the other club members arrived, she thanked him and left the club room behind.

And then he became a part of her past.

•

“Class has started, everyone! Stop talking already!” the math teacher shouted over the forty or so chattering students. “Grr... just *shut up*!”

The students kept on chatting about what they’d watched on TV yesterday, or the newscaster who’d been caught in an affair. It was a standard predicament for the math teacher, who was short and unattractive and whose class was always boring.

“This will be on the test!” he tried again. Nevertheless, the conversation around him continued. “What’s wrong with this class?! Why don’t you take me seriously? Darn it...” The teacher stamped his feet like a spoiled child.

“Um, should I call for attention again?” asked the class representative, Chidori Kaname. She was dressed in her usual uniform, her long black hair tied at the end with a red ribbon.

Unfortunately, her polite offer just seemed to irritate the math teacher more. “Oh, please!” he scoffed. “It’s obvious that shouting won’t do any good!”

“True, but...” Kaname had ordered their silence over and over, but whatever quiet she achieved never lasted more than half a minute.

“It’s just no use! Isn’t there anyone else who can help? Who’s on day duty?” the teacher demanded. “Speak up!”

“Er... It’s Sagara-kun,” said Kaname, “but—”

“Okay, then! Sagara! You here?”

“I’m here.” Sagara Sousuke, who had been reading a thick Western novel in the corner, looked up. He was a transfer student who’d been raised on the battlefield. He had a sullen expression, a tight frown, and an aura of perpetual readiness.

“You’re on day duty, right?! Quiet them down!” the teacher told him.

“Sir,” Sousuke replied, “I don’t believe that falls under the purview of day du—”

“Just quiet them down already!” The math teacher, having completely lost his mind with rage at this point, vented his anger unjustly on Sousuke.

“Understood.” At this, Sousuke began rooting around in his bag.

Kaname, watching him from the side, said, “Hey, Sousuke.”

“Yes, Chidori?”

“No firing your gun at the ceiling, okay?”

Sousuke shook his head. “Don’t worry. I won’t use a gun.”

“Really? Well... all right then, I suppose.”

“Close your eyes and cover your ears. You too, sir.”

“Eh?” Kaname asked with alarm. “Wait, what are you—”

He pulled a grenade from his bag, removed the pin and threw it into the air.

HAND
PAUL
AND

The chatter continued to fill the room, and then... *Blam!!!*

The grenade detonated two meters up in the center of the classroom. It didn't produce dangerous shrapnel or flames, just a powerful flash and a bang. Then, silence reigned.

As the smoke cleared, the students could be made out again, either collapsed on the floor or slumped over their desks. The chorus of chatter and gossip that had once reigned was completely gone.

Sousuke had employed a powerful stun grenade, designed to disable terrorists without killing them.

"All right." Sousuke knelt down and shook the math teacher, who was now slumped at the foot of his lectern. "They've been silenced, as ordered... Sir?" He closed his eyes silently as he realized the math teacher had been rendered unconscious and was foaming at the mouth. "The fool..."

"You're the fool!" Kaname, the first to recover from the attack, charged in and landed a hard kick to Sousuke's back.

They were on the train home after class that day.

"Darn it... It's some trouble or other every three days. When will that idiot *finally* learn how life works here?" Kaname asked in exhaustion.

"Hmm... But when he first got here, it was *three* times *every* day. That's progress, right?" said her classmate, Tokiwa Kyoko, a petite girl with coke bottle glasses and braids. She'd fallen victim to her fair share of Sousuke's mischief, but mainly seemed to find it amusing.

"You're way too generous, Kyoko."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot," said Kyoko with a shrug. Hers was a truly impressive personality; she could have had a halo over her head and little wings on her back.

"Point is, scolding him and cleaning up after him all the time is a huge pain in my neck," said Kaname, continuing to rant. "I wish he'd consider how it makes me feel!"

"I mean, you don't actually *have* to do all that..."

"But... I'm the class representative, and the student council vice president..."

These were her usual excuses, which Kyoko waved off dismissively. "Yeah, yeah..."

"What's with the attitude?" Kaname said with a scowl.

Kyoko ignored her. “Nothing. It’s just, I feel like you’re stuck in a rut too, Kana-chan. You still won’t admit how you feel—”

“Kyoko.” Kaname leaned in close to her, enunciating carefully so the other girl didn’t miss a word. “Read my lips. Sousuke is not even in the *universe* of what I’d ever consider for a romantic partner.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve known that from the start. He’s a war-addled fool, a pain in my butt, and he hasn’t got a single scrap of tact.”

“Well, I know all that... But you always seem to have a lot of fun when you’re together,” Kyoko pointed out.

Her friend’s words gave Kaname a moment of doubt, but she soon snapped back to herself with a snort. “I-It might look that way, but it’s an optical illusion.”

“Oh, yeah?”

The train stopped at Chofu Station. They’d decided to get off together there to go shopping at the nearby Parco. But as the train doors opened...

“Ah...” Kaname stared at the boy who was now directly across from her. “Fuwa... senpai?”

He was dressed in a suit-style school uniform with disheveled hair; effortlessly good-looking, with a confident air. He was taller now, she noted, with broader shoulders.

“Chidori,” said Fuwa. “This is a surprise...”

Kaname and the young man, Fuwa, stared at each other for such a long time that the train pulled out, leaving the three on the platform.

“That’s a cute uniform,” Fuwa finally said. “Is that from Jindai?”

“Eh?” Kaname snapped back to attention. “Ah... Yes, it is.”

Fuwa’s voice took on a slightly teasing tone. “Seriously, Chidori. How’d you make it into Jindai with grades like yours?”

“Hey, don’t make fun of me!” said Kaname, poking at Fuwa’s arm with an easy playfulness.

“Sorry,” Fuwa said with a laugh, seemingly unbothered. “But... you’re looking well. I’m glad to see that.”

“Thanks,” she told him. “So are you.”

“Cool. You want to grab a drink somewhere? Oh, I see you’re with a friend...”

“Ah? Oh... can we, Kyoko?”

“Um... sure.” Kyoko looked a little uncertain, but Kaname completely failed to notice her friend’s discomfort.

Over the next few days, Kaname began acting strangely. It was so noticeable that even Sousuke, who was typically as dense as a dinosaur when it came to daily social niceties, had picked up on it.

In the morning, Kaname walked quietly, lost in thought, from the train station to school. She’d look a little startled whenever someone greeted her, then say in a strangely cheery voice, “Oh, good morning!” She wasn’t usually a morning person, and her typical greeting was a listless, *“Geh... morning...”*

In the afternoon, one of her classmates got his hands on a smoke grenade while cleaning his weapons, and detonated it. Upon seeing this, Kaname just said distractedly, “Try to be more careful, okay?” Normally she would’ve said *“You’re going to pay for this!”* and smacked him over the head.

And then, in the evening... On most days, when there was nothing better to do, she ate in the student council room. But she’d spent that time alone on the roof for the past few days, staring into space. She seemed like she was in good enough spirits, but also like she was concerned about something. There was a strangely dissonant air about her that was hard to describe.

“Chidori,” said Sousuke. It was lunchtime on the third day of such behavior, and Kaname was just leaving for the student council room.

“What is it, Sousuke?” Kaname stopped to ask. When he did nothing but stare at her silently in response, she spoke up again, fidgeting, “Is there something on my face?”

“No,” he finally said, “but is there some kind of problem?”

“Er?”

“If you’re facing some sort of difficulty, I’d be happy to help you.”

The minute he said that, Kaname masked her feelings with a forced smile. But upon realizing she couldn’t fully hide her uncertainty from him, she then looked away and said, “It’s fine... It’s nothing bad. Really, don’t worry about it. Sorry.” And with that, she left him behind.

“Something really is strange. Don’t you agree?” Sousuke asked Kyoko,

who was poking at her lunch nearby.

“Strange? What do you mean?” asked Kyoko, popping a piece of tamagoyaki into her mouth.

“Chidori,” he clarified. “She’s acting strangely.”

“Yeah... maybe.”

“Do you know something, Tokiwa?”

“Ah... No, I don’t,” said Kyoko, as her expression clouded over. Her braids, which usually popped straight out from her head, almost seemed to droop.

“Do you think someone’s threatening her again?” Sousuke asked.

“I don’t think that’s it...”

“Or she’s going through withdrawal from some kind of narcotic?”

“Definitely not.”

“Has the president asked her to take part in a secret mission?”

“Um, Sagara-kun...” Kyoko smiled at him with a wince.

Sousuke folded his arms. “Tokiwa,” he said, “I have a favor to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“If you find a clue to explain it, let me know. No matter how minor it seems.”

Kyoko fell silent.

“I’d really like to know,” he told her earnestly. “I’m worried.” With that, he pulled a lunch box from under his desk—it contained a strange cut of dried meat and a tomato—and began slicing at them with his combat knife.

While he did so, Kyoko paused in her eating, her gaze focused downward. After a long period of hesitation, she said, “Sagara-kun...”

“Yes?”

“Are you free two days from now? Sunday?”

“I can make myself free,” he said.

“Want to go out with me then? I can show you why Kana-chan’s acting strangely.”

The amusement park on the outskirts of Tokyo was, frankly speaking, not particularly popular. The roller coaster was showing patches of rust. The buildings were reminiscent of abandoned hospitals. The arcade featured ancient cabinets, like *Xevious* and *Kung-Fu Master*. The employees barely cared about their jobs, so even on a Sunday the visitors were sparse. It felt

like the world’s most half-hearted amusement park.

But Kaname and Fuwa had pleasant memories of this place, which is why they had chosen it for their date.

“We ditched class to come here, remember?” Fuwa, who was dressed in his street clothes today, said as they passed through the entrance. “We ran into each other on the morning commute and you said you didn’t want to go to school today. I could barely believe it.”

“But you still came with me, Senpai.” Kaname had eschewed her usual casual street clothes, instead opting for a billowy knit sweater and a pleated skirt in pale brown. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “But this time, it was you who agreed to come with me.”

“Is it all right, though? Don’t you have entrance exams?”

“Yeah... But it’s good to take a breather now and again. Don’t worry about it.”

“Well, if you’re sure...” said Kaname, trailing off uncertainly.

The day they’d bumped into each other, Fuwa had asked if she’d like to get together sometime. Kaname had initially agreed, but she’d felt strangely distracted ever since. On one hand, she was looking forward to seeing him again. But at the same time, she felt hesitant, and that awkward feeling had yet to go away. She’d felt guilty when Sousuke had asked if she was in trouble, even though she’d done nothing wrong.

Now, Kaname took a deep breath and drove that feeling from her mind. *Yes,* she told herself, *I’m not doing anything wrong...*

“Let’s just have fun,” she proposed. “For as long as we’re here, you know?”

“Yeah, good idea,” said Fuwa.

And with that, they walked off, side by side.

“...And that’s basically it,” Kyoko said from her hiding place, which was behind a pillar at the park’s entrance. She was dressed in a highly suspect outfit today, consisting of a black suit, round sunglasses, and a long coat. Sousuke was hiding with her, similarly dressed. Side by side, they looked like bad Blues Brothers imitators.

The park’s mascot, Bonta-kun, stood nearby. It was looking suspiciously at the two of them with its strangely wide eyes, but they elected to ignore it.

“That’s Kana-chan’s senpai,” Kyoko explained. “They dated a little in middle school, and then they ran into each other on the way home from school the other day.”

“Dated?” Sousuke echoed.

“They weren’t just any senpai and kouhai, you know?”

Sousuke put a hand on his chin. “He appears to be a student from another high school.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Chidori is our vice president,” he pointed out. “The most rational explanation is that he’s getting close to her in order to steal our school’s secrets.”

Kyoko slumped over dejectedly. “Come on, you know that’s not it,” she insisted. “Our student council doesn’t have any secrets anyone would want.”

“Actually, it does.”

“Huh? Like what?”

“All kinds of things: the way we use parts of our budget; blackmail material on the teachers and PTA members; a list of undercover agents infiltrating delinquent groups,” Sousuke told her. “There’s plenty of dangerous information we wouldn’t want to leak.”

“Sheesh, Hayashimizu-senpai...” said Kyoko with a despondent sigh.

Sousuke chose to ignore her. “The point is, however close he and Chidori may be... I believe I must put a stop to this before the information gets out,” he said gravely. Then, pulling a shotgun out from under his coat, he took aim at the two as they began to walk away.

Kyoko grabbed his arm tightly. “No! Sagara-kun, don’t you dare!”

“Tokiwa?” he asked, perplexed by her intervention.

“Kana-chan will seriously hate you!” she insisted. “Do *not* hurt him, okay?!”

Even Sousuke couldn’t help but be intimidated. He’d never heard Kyoko speak so harshly about anything.

She snapped back to her usual manner a moment later. “L-Look... they’re not spies, okay? Watch them a little longer and think it over again. Okay?”

“Hmm... If you insist, I’ll watch a while longer,” said Sousuke, putting his shotgun away.

Kyoko breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Now, let’s just tail them quietly.”

“Right,” he agreed. “Keep your guard up, Tokiwa.”

And so, they followed the pair in secret.

In fact, the mood between Fuwa and Kaname was as far from ‘collaborating spies’ as one could get. They got down off the roller coaster with genuine smiles. She then pleaded with him cutely, tugging at his arm until they rode it again.

After taking a turn on the teacups, Kaname was feeling a little ill, and Fuwa doted on her with a smile. He bought her a balloon that Bonta-kun was selling; Kaname patted the mascot’s head with a bright smile and took a picture with him. Then they played a measure-your-strength game in the arcade, where Kaname clapped enthusiastically as Fuwa set a new record with a 130 kg punch.

They had walked with a degree of distance between them at the start, but the distance between them was gradually closing. Now and then, a melancholy look came into Kaname’s eyes, but other than that, they looked just like any couple in love.

After hours of fun, Fuwa and Kaname bought some snacks and drinks at a nearby kiosk, then sat down on a nearby bench.

“Indeed, it wasn’t at all what I expected,” Sousuke finally acknowledged from behind some plants. “There’s none of the intensity of covert activities here. They appear to be... enjoying each other’s company. That’s good.” he said firmly, adjusting his sunglasses.

“Sagara-kun... Are you okay?” Kyoko asked from beside him.

“Of course I am. I’m fine. I understand the relieved and feel very situation.”

“Really?” she asked suspiciously. “I think you’re scrambling your words a little...”

“Purely your imagination. I am calm. Calm enough to burn.” With that, Sousuke suddenly began doing maintenance on his pistol. “I can move very precisely. Even with my eyes closed...” Then, with a silly ‘ping’ sound, the pistol’s recoil spring went flying. “I can even send parts of my gun flying.”

“I didn’t think you’d understand if I just told you,” Kyoko told him apologetically. “That’s why I brought you here. I thought you’d end up in a

really awkward situation otherwise."

"I see."

"Maybe that was cruel. I'm sorry."

"No, there's no issue," said Sousuke, swiftly repairing his pistol and sticking it back in his holster. Then he gave a series of precise but baffling orders to Kyoko: "Our reconnaissance is complete, so we should return home. We'll secure an exit and erase our tracks. I'll leave my explosives here and take you to the de Danaan. RV at point Alpha. Don't forget to ask for the helicopter's ETA."

"It's gotten to you pretty badly, huh?" she commented.

"Anyway, let's go." Sousuke began to walk away stiffly. But just then...

"Heeeya there!" said a slovenly voice.

Sousuke turned in time to see Kaname and Fuwa, seated together on a bench, as they were accosted by a strange group of middle-aged men with punch perms and tottering about as if drunk. "Looka you two, flirtin' in the middle'a the day," one of them slurred. "You students, yeah? You oughta be home, studyin'!" Middle-aged men day-drinking in an amusement park seemed like the far bigger societal problem than students taking a Sunday off, but at any rate, they were clearly trying to pick a fight.

Kaname was saying something to the men with a sarcastic expression. Sousuke couldn't hear it from this distance, but...

"What was that, ya little brat?!" She'd probably made some kind of biting comment, he reasoned next, because the old men with their punch perms became agitated and moved to surround them.

"Oh... maybe they're professional yakuza," Kyoko realized. "That's not good,"

"Not an issue," Sousuke reminded her. "I'm a professional mercenary."

"Can you save them?"

"Yes. It doesn't matter who she's getting friendly with. I will protect her," said Sousuke, his eyes downcast. "I was never doing this to earn her favor, after all."

Kyoko's eyes began to shine. "Sagara-kun... you're awesome!"

"Indeed," he agreed solemnly. "Here I go..."

"Ah, but wait! You need a better disguise," said Kyoko, "or Kana-chan will know it's you."

"Hmm..." Even in a suit with sunglasses on, she would recognize him if

he got too close. Sousuke rubbed the back of his head and began to look around swiftly. Around the back of a kiosk, he laid eyes on an old man in a tank top who'd just removed his heavy mascot costume and was taking a breather.

"Show a little respect fer yer elders, brat!" the drunken old man shouted at Kaname.

But despite wrinkling her nose a little from the beer on his breath, she didn't falter. "Elders?" she retorted. "More like drunkards and bullies! And I haven't forgotten what you said before: you think me being a teenager means he must be paying me? How stupid are you?"

"C-Chidori," said Fuwa, trying to talk her down. "That's a little..."

But Kaname ignored him. "Just piss off already!" she told the old men. "My senpai's taking entrance exams and I don't want him catching your brain rot!"

"The hell'd you say?!"

Now completely enraged, the men reached for Kaname. Fuwa tried to intervene and Kaname began to stiffen up, but what stopped them was the interruption of a sharp voice. "Fumoffu."

Scratch that... A strange voice.

The teenagers and old men looked up in unison to see a strange plush mascot standing on the roof of the kiosk across the way.

"Bonta... kun?" Kaname muttered. It had a strange head—almost canine, but not quite—a squat, two-heads-tall body like Q-Taro, and big round eyes. It was rather charming, really.

"Fumo. Fumoffu. Fumooo?" After saying something that had the cadence of an introduction, Bonta-kun tried to cross his arms boldly and failed; they were simply too stubby for the gesture. "Fumo, fumoffu, fumo!" said Bonta-kun, scolding the group with greater intensity now.

"Wha?"

"Fumoffu! Fumoffu! Fumoffu!" Bonta-kun shouted angrily at the drunks, who just looked at him in confusion. Then, clearly angry over the fact that he couldn't make his feelings known, Bonta-kun pulled a pebble from somewhere and tossed it at them. "Fumo!"

The pebble plonked against one of the drunkards' heads. "Ow," the man said angrily. "What the hell're you doin'?!"

“Fumoffu.” Bonta beckoned haughtily with one hand.

“All right! Come down from there, asshole!” one of the men shouted, striding toward the kiosk.

“Fumo... Fumoffu.” Bonta-kun crouched down, then ran into a cute little jog before leaping from the kiosk roof.

ふもっ
FU MO!

“Oh—”

Crash! Bonta-kun’s body slam knocked the man to the ground!

“B-Boss!” said one of the men, who appeared to be yakuza after all. The other men, now infuriated, charged at Bonta-kun, who was still lying on the ground. “You’re gonna get it now, asshole!”

“Fumoffu...” Bonta-kun tried to get back up, but failed—his legs were short, and he was shaped like a dumpling. Nevertheless, he remained calm, rolling along the ground until he could use his momentum to get up like an okiagari-koboshi doll.

“Very agile...” Kaname said in mild disbelief.

Meanwhile, Bonta-kun launched into action. He gave one man a headbutt, threw another, then stamped on each of them as they hit the ground. When the men begged him to stop, all they got in return was a heartless “Fumo, fumo!” and more pounding.

Bonta-kun fought like an angry god incarnate.

“E-Eek!” The last of the men, uncertain of what to do, flew into a rage. After giving Bonta-kun the slip, he pulled out a knife and charged at Kaname, clearly in want of a hostage.

“Ah...”

“Chidori!” Fuwa moved in front of her as the man charged, his knife flashing...

Crash! Bam! There was a loud gunshot, and the man collapsed. He’d taken a rubber slug to the back.

Kaname looked up in surprise and saw Bonta-kun, holding a shotgun whose muzzle was trailing white smoke. *Eh?*

Noticing Kaname’s gaze on him, Bonta-kun quickly stowed the shotgun back under his costume.

Just then, a child arrived and began shouting hysterically, “Mommy! Daddy and his friends got drunk and passed out again!”

“Oh? Not again. Honestly...” This appeared to be the drunkard’s family. Other rubberneckers began to gather as well, which in turn drew park security.

“Ah, that’s him! That’s the one who stole my precious Bonta-kun!” an old man in a tank top shouted from the back of the guard group.

“Fumoffu...” Clearly panicked, Bonta-kun began to run. He must have mastered the costume’s unique gait already, because he moved quickly

despite his stubby legs.

“G-Get back here!” yelled the guards in hot pursuit.

Kaname and Fuwa just stood there for a while, staring, as the commotion left them behind. Then they snapped out of their trance and, after walking around a while longer, got on the Ferris wheel that let them overlook the park.

“What was that all about? A new attraction?” said Fuwa, once they’d finally caught their breath.

“Seems a little extreme for that,” Kaname told him uneasily. “Ha ha...”

“Yeah, but the way you talked to those men was really extreme, too,” he told her. “They were just drunken jerks, but you really riled them up...”

“Ah... sorry. I guess I put you in danger, huh?” Kaname bowed to him regretfully.

Fuwa smiled and waved it off. “It’s okay. It was kind of exciting, actually. And it’s very... you, Chidori. That kind of behavior is one thing I really like about you.”

“Er...” Kaname felt her heart skip a beat. She’d never been complimented on something she thought of as a fault before.

“Hey...” They were at around 2 o’clock on the Ferris wheel, when Fuwa changed the subject. “I wasn’t able to say it back then, but... will you be my girlfriend, Chidori?”

“Senpai...”

“I think... I really like you. I did then, and I still do,” he told her earnestly. “So... Chidori...”

In theory, she had been waiting for years to hear those words. And she *was* certainly happy to hear them. But... “I’m sorry,” said Kaname, who didn’t even have to think about it. The moment he’d said those words, she’d known the answer plain as day. There was no way she could respond, “Yes, I’d love to,” when she’d known it felt wrong from the start.

But why? she wondered.

“I see.” Fuwa let out a deep sigh. He looked pained for about three seconds, and then smiled again in relief. “There’s another guy, huh?”

“Er?”

“I just got that feeling. Today’s been fun,” he admitted, “but from time to time, you seemed like you were thinking about someone else.”

His observation sent Kaname into a panic. “Um... well, er...”

“What’s he like? I’m curious.”

“Er, there’s really...” *Not anyone else?* she thought, but she couldn’t bring herself to say so with confidence. Even though normally, she’d have been able to say it with ease...

Her hesitance seemed to confirm Fuwa’s suspicions. “For you to fall for him, he must be pretty dependable and mature.”

“Not at all,” she denied vehemently. “Yeah, totally not!”

Fuwa just blinked at her abrupt, fervent denial.

Kaname felt herself getting a little flustered just then, so she turned her eyes away from him to gaze out of the car. She could see the full grounds of the amusement park from here and watch Bonta-kun, the size of an ant, running full tilt around the merry-go-round, a gang of security guards in pursuit. As one leaped into his way, Bonta-kun leaped over him, mounting one of the horses to keep up the chase.

That idiot, she thought. Kyoko had probably egged him into tailing her. Normally she’d be angry with them, but for some reason today, she felt happy about it. *Darn it,* she realized. *There’s just no getting around it, I guess...* Looking on as Bonta-kun determinedly gave them the slip, Kaname felt a smile come to her face.

The mascot suit was incredibly heavy and hard to maneuver in. And since the zipper had broken off in the brawl earlier, he couldn’t remove it. He’d shaken off the guards’ pursuit for now, but there was no way for him to get away entirely in something so conspicuous. *Drat,* thought Sousuke.

Beginning to panic, he ran along an empty road and... Suddenly, Kaname was standing in the middle of it. Her senpai, Fuwa, wasn’t with her. She seemed to have been waiting for him, and held her hands out as if to block Sousuke’s passage.

He stopped, questioningly, but didn’t know what to say.

“Hide in the bushes there,” she urged him. “Hurry.”

Sousuke did as he was told without a second thought. The moment after his squat body took shelter in the underbrush, a group of security guards arrived. “Excuse me, miss! Have you seen a shotgun-wielding Bonta-kun mascot? We saw him come down this path...”

“He went that-a-way,” Kaname told them, sending the guards off in a completely random direction. Once they were gone, it was just the two of

them left. “You should be safe a while now, Bonta-kun.”

“Right. Thank you,” he said breathlessly, but the strange voice changer just turned his words into “Fumo. Fumoffu.”

Kaname laughed in great amusement. “Thanks for before.”

“Fumo. Fumoffu. (It was nothing.)”

“As long as you’re here to help,” she said next, “can I tell you about a personal thing that’s going on with me?”

“Fumo, (Very well),” he responded suspiciously, as she sat down on a nearby bench.

“Today... I went on a date with a guy I used to have a crush on.”

“...Fumo. (...I see.)” Bonta-kun’s shoulders slumped.

A sort of amusement came into Kaname’s eyes as she noticed the gesture. “He was my senpai back in middle school...” Slowly, she told him about her and her senpai: that she’d gotten to know him as an assistant in his club; that she’d always had feelings for him; that recently, she’d happened to run into him again; and that just a little while ago, he asked if she wanted to be his girlfriend, and that she’d turned him down.

Sousuke could only sit there, surprised by this development.

“Do you know why I said no, Bonta-kun?” asked Kaname.

“Fumo... (Er...)”

“I don’t really know either,” she admitted. “But recently, while I was really trying to process the whole thing, a classmate came up and asked if I was okay. For once, he was actually worried about me, even though he’s usually dense as a rock.”

A classmate, Sousuke thought to himself. *Usually dense as a rock. To whom could she be referring?*

She gently squeezed Bonta-kun’s fluffy paw. “It made me really happy...”

“Fumoffu? (Chidori?)”

“...Though I felt a little guilty about it.” With that, Kaname smiled again. Then she stood up from the bench, feeling like a weight had dropped from her shoulders. “And that’s that,” she concluded. “Starting tomorrow, everything’s back to normal. So rest easy, *Bonta-kun.* Later.”

She patted the mascot on the head and left. As her light footsteps drifted away, Sousuke just stood there and watched her go.

“Fumo... (Hmm...)”

Back to normal, he thought. As he felt those words, for some reason, the weight of the costume seemed to vanish. It was a curious feeling.

"There he is! Over there!" Sousuke heard a shout, followed by multiple footsteps.

Time to escape!

Bonta-kun dug down deep and ran like the wind.

Captain Amigo and Golden Days

The trip was a lengthy one.

It was the Thursday before a certain long weekend. After sixth period ended, Sagara Sousuke rushed out of the school, heading for nearby Chofu Airfield. He boarded a Cessna, which had been prepared for him by a small and discreet airline company, and took off in a hurry.

The Cessna flew south over the Pacific ocean. A little over two hours later, it arrived at a small airport on Hachijojima. The veteran pilot had never asked why the tight-lipped high school student had business so frequently on the island, and Sousuke had never volunteered that information. In fact, Sousuke didn't have business on Hachijojima. He was just transferring to a turboprop at the airport there.

The turboprop's pilot saluted Sousuke as he arrived. "Excellent weather today, Sergeant," he said. "Blue skies and calm winds."

"Indeed. I'm ready to go," Sousuke responded as he changed out of his student uniform in the cabin.

The twin-engine King Air was on the older side, appearing to have been in service for over twenty years. The same couldn't be said of its internals, where the engines and navigation system had been swapped out for the latest models. It was a tough-built machine that could reach cruising speeds of over 500 kph, and even handle a thunderstorm.

As dusk fell, they departed the airport and flew further south. The trip would take about three and a half hours, so Sousuke used that time to finish his math homework.

Above them was a sky full of stars. Below was the endless black sea.

They were over two thousand kilometers south of Tokyo, at the furthest reaches of Japan, even a few hundred kilometers past the likes of Iwojima and Okinotori-shima. They were in airspace far away from any existing air and maritime shipping lanes; a plane that went down here would have no hope for aid.

"We're almost there," the pilot said. An island came into view soon

after, a moonlit patch on the otherwise pitch black sea. It was roughly crescent in shape, about ten kilometers long in total.

The pilot opened communications and requested permission to land. After some back and forth, the person on the other side of the comm said, “Welcome to my home, Gebo 30. You have permission to land.”

And then, something happened on the pitch black island. On its west side, the canopy of the broad-leafed jungle began to split. Landing lights came on one by one, creating a 2000-meter-long runway in the middle of the blackness, gradually coming closer in their vision.

“Now... let’s see.” The pilot licked his lip and entered landing posture. He extended the flaps, pulled back on the throttle, and lowered their altitude, all without issue. The craft landed casually on the runway.

Finally here, thought Sousuke, stretching to work the stiffness out of his shoulders. The GPS above the console read 20°N 50 minutes latitude, 140°E 31 minutes longitude. The island wasn’t on most maps, but Sousuke, the pilot, and others in their crew referred to it as Merida Island.

Merida Island: it looked uninhabited from above. But below, things were different. It was host to all kinds of cutting-edge equipment, weapons, and ammunition, as well as combatants’ daily training. It also housed the maintenance dock for the super high-tech amphibious combat submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan. This was the West Pacific outpost for Mithril, the top secret mercenary company to which Sousuke belonged.

“Yet they can’t even waterproof the damned ceiling!” Sergeant Kurz Weber shouted as he emptied a mug full of water into a bucket. He was dressed in olive-colored fatigues, with a Mithril ID card pinned to his chest. He had shoulder-length blond hair, deep blue eyes, and delicate, handsome features. A person might mistake him for a movie star... as long as he wasn’t talking.

But Kurz was definitely talking now.

“Cutting-edge secret base, my ass! Super high-tech stronghold, my ass! It stopped raining hours ago, but the leaks are still coming in! My desk is soaked through! Instead of pouring money into that weird mammoth submarine, how about fixing the damned roof?!” Kurz complained as he came and went from the sparsely populated office.

The office held simple desks for about ten people. There were also electronic terminals, document files, piles of copy paper, maps, a large LCD

panel on the wall displaying a map of the West Pacific and a schedule... and water dripping down through the plasterboard in the ceiling.

This was the SRT (Special Response Team) office housed beneath the island. Although they were primarily combatants, the SRT's members still had desk work to do. This included compiling reports after missions, requisitioning new equipment, writing proposals for upcoming operations—and most importantly, detailing expenditures.

"Gross food, no decent booze, showers that take a full minute to warm up," Kurz grumbled. "Greasy smell in the wastewater pipes, soundproofing so bad you can hear the commotion from the hangar in the barracks, an elevator next to the hundred-step staircase that's been 'Out of Order' for as long as I can remember... Is this any way to treat a prince like me? Is it?" Kurz's bitching continued until Master Sergeant Melissa Mao, who was doing work at a separate desk with an umbrella perched over it, chucked an eraser at the back of his head. "Ow," he complained. "What was that for?"

"You're as pathetic as you are annoying!" she yelled. "If you're not gonna do any work, just get out!" Mao was a Chinese-American with short black hair and large, catlike eyes. An ID card was pinned to her black tank top.

"Get out?" he retorted. "And go where? The leaking in the barracks is even worse!"

"So hit up the game room. I saw Roger in there looking bored a while back."

"Nah, all they've got there is ping-pong and Tetris. It's like a crummy hot springs inn," Kurz sulked.

"What about the pub? There's a pool table there."

"That's for helicopter pilots only. And after I creamed 'em last time, they said they didn't wanna play with me anymore."

"Bunch of children..." Mao sighed as she went back to work.

Kurz grumpily resumed his busywork. "There's no action lately, just boring training and drills. Ah, I wanna go back to the city... But we won't have time off for a while, huh? Wish I was Sousuke..."

"What's this about me?" asked Sagara Sousuke, who had at some point arrived at the office. He had a sullen face and a tight frown, was wearing fatigues, and carrying a student's leather handbag. After a nod of greeting to Mao, he walked in past Kurz.

“Oh? When did you get back?”

“Just now. But still...” Sousuke looked carefully around the muggy office. “Why is there so much mess on my desk?” He pointed to his desk, which was piled high with trash and documents as well as magazines, both specialist and non. Kurz’s desk was next to his, and in an equally tragic state, as if the infantry of his disorder had breached the border to seize the territory of Sousuke’s desk for itself. “It gets worse every time I come here.”

“Oh, chill out. It’s not like you were using it,” Kurz laughed, patting his comrade on the shoulder.

The lines on Sousuke’s forehead grew deeper as he shoved his bag under the desk. “So, will drop practice take place at 2300 as planned?”

“Oh, that?” Mao, tapped her electronic tablet pen against her temple as she swiveled her chair to face Sousuke. “Seems we can’t do it tonight after all. It’s the M9s... Maintenance was supposed to replace all the thigh and waist muscle packages, but they’re running way behind. I tried to contact you to let you know, but you’d already left Hachijojima by then...”

They were supposed to employ Mithril’s main arm slave fighting force —the M9 Gernsbacks—for practice, but it seemed these were far behind in maintenance. Obviously, they always had machines ready for use in case of an emergency, but they weren’t about to tap into those for training. Thus, the scheduled practice was apparently off.

In other words, Sousuke had rushed 2500 kilometers south after school for nothing.

“Sorry! I was careless!” said Mao, clapping her hands together in apology. It wasn’t a very American gesture, but she’d apparently picked it up somewhere.

“Well... If we can’t, we can’t,” Sousuke said with a slight slump of the shoulders.

Kurz looked at him in wonderment. “Weirdo. What kind of guy is that disappointed about not having practice?”

“Well... it’s more that I had to turn down a dinner invitation to come here...”

“From who?”

“Kaname and Kyoko. It was going to be my first chance to try real hachis de boeuf...” Sousuke explained.

Mao giggled at this, but Kurz just let out a disinterested hum. “Yeah? Poor guy. Let’s hit the pub, then. We’ll grab a drink.” He immediately began to push Sousuke out of the office.

“I don’t drink.”

“Bah! Live a little. Not like you got anything better to do tonight.”

“Alcohol destroys brain cells,” Sousuke protested. “If I want to do this job for a long time—”

“Just come on.”

Arguing back-and-forth, the two left the office.

Mao remained behind, watching them go with a tilted head, before she at last turned back to her desk. *If you’re that bored, you could just read a book...* she thought. After wandering restlessly around the base complaining for hours, Kurz was in high spirits the minute his playmate returned. “He really is a child,” she whispered.

At any rate, there were no leaks in the roof of the pub. The base’s soldiers, all of whom had finished their work for the day, lounged around beneath the amber lighting. It was mainly people from different departments clustered together, gossiping, drinking, and enjoying themselves.

The individual departments mainly socialized among themselves, with the result that the NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) associated with the SRT, like Sousuke and Kurz, were often left fairly isolated. Part of it was that their numbers were small by design, and part of it was that, as the base’s elite combatants, they tended to keep their distance from the base staff.

The SRT’s members, who also tended towards introversion, were guarded in their words and actions. Even if they looked relaxed on the surface, they always projected a sense of being ready to spring into action at any moment. While it was rare to meet one quite as unsociable as Sousuke, gregarious types like Kurz were definitely the minority. Not many of them were habitual drinkers, either.

It was under these circumstances that Sousuke and Kurz set up shop at the pub’s counter.

“It’s my first time here,” Sousuke said, a glass of orange juice in hand.

“Really?”

“Really. Places like this are bad for your health,” he insisted again. “Too much cigarette smoke.”

“Feh. If you’re worried about your health, you shouldn’t be a soldier. A life on the run, awful food, tons of stress and danger. It’s bad for your complexion,” Kurz snorted and gulped down his scotch. When the shot glass was empty, he ordered another and let out a sigh. “...Still. Wish I had money. Maybe I should quit the rat race and open up my own pub somewhere.”

“But you must be making money,” said Sousuke, looking at his friend curiously. “You get a stipend to your base pay and you receive plenty of hazard bonuses. You would have received compensation for what happened in Sunan, as well.”

It was true; Mithril took care of its people. The yearly salary for SRT members was considerable, making about as much as your average middling pro baseball player. It was highly specialized work, after all, and uniformly dangerous.

“Ah... True, but I’ve always had huge debts,” Kurz was forced to admit. “No matter how much I make, it doesn’t seem to get me anywhere.”

“You never mentioned that before.”

“Yeah, and don’t go spreading it around either. Anyway... guess I’ll have to stick around eating their gross food a while longer. Though the M9 piloting part is nice.”

Sousuke went silent.

Kurz stole a glance at him. “You’ve got a lot saved up, huh?” he asked, apparently with a bit of expectation.

“Saved up? I did... but it’s rapidly decreasing,” Sousuke told him. “My expenses have been high lately.”

“Expenses? What’re you spending on?”

“Replacing the things I destroy at school. After about two weeks of living in Tokyo, the squad’s account manager said they couldn’t keep paying for it all and I’d have to go out of pocket.”

“You break that much stuff?”

“I’m not doing it because I want to,” Sousuke protested. “It’s for security purposes.”

Kurz stared in disbelief while Sousuke quietly sipped his orange juice. Then he rallied enough to say, “Anyway... Mithril’s spending priorities are

messed up. They'll skip waterproofing the roof and then break the bank on more lousy weapons. During last week's tests, I shot off 200,000 dollars' worth of missiles, you know? Yet here I am, worrying about whether I can afford a two-dollar snack to go with my booze. It's crazy."

"You're crazier, if you're creating equivalencies between anti-tank missiles and bar peanuts."

"It sorta pisses me off to hear that from you, of all people..."

"I'm just pointing out that a military is an exceptional entity."

"You never shut up, do you?" Kurz sniped. "I dunno how Kaname stands you."

"Well, she does frequently hit me and tells me to shut up."

"Maybe you should work on that, then."

As that pointless conversation continued, the head bartender approached them. He was a Caucasian, late middle age, and walked with a slight limp in his right leg. He had a round ruddy face, gray hair, and looked exactly like the late actor, Ernest Borgnine. He was a former mercenary himself, and his bad leg had been injured in a past battle... or so Kurz had heard. He'd said many times there was "no one in the Congo or Rhodesia" who didn't know his name. But while Kurz had heard vaguely of the Congo, Rhodesia was a complete mystery to him.

"Hey, kids. What's got you so down?" the bartender asked in his gravelly voice.

"Lay off. We're in a bad mood," Kurz huffed back. It was a typical exchange for the two of them, and the bartender responded by sitting down across the counter and pouring a twelve-year-old Wild Turkey into a shot glass.

"Is this on the house?" Kurz asked.

"Don't be stupid. It's for me." And as Kurz just stared, the bartender downed his bourbon with a burp. "All right, you two. I've been listening in —"

"Sure wish you hadn't," Kurz whispered, but the bartender ignored him.

"—and I'm hearing a lot of griping about money and accounting. Don't you think it's pathetic? When there are young people all over the world—"

"He's not listening," Sousuke whispered, but the bartender ignored him.

"—really fighting for what they believe in. This is what happens when you rely too much on high-tech equipment. If you ask me, you don't need

homing missiles or ridiculous humanoid weapons. To defeat one enemy, you just need a single bullet, and to defeat a lot of enemies you should also need a single bullet. You get what I'm saying? Nah, 'course you don't."

"That's a hell of a thing to say to a sniper..." Kurz said, slumping over.

The old man fixed him with a glare. "Fool. I'm talking about spirit: the will to see your ideals through, the hope to propel you through life... the spirit of adventure! That's what you don't got, and that's why you're down in the dumps. You're not even trying to get the most out of the moment by ordering peanuts and salami."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kurz said.

"It sounds like he's trying to upsell us," Sousuke put in.

The old man rolled his eyes and let out a high-pitched wail. "Fool!" he cried out. "I'm just saying, if you're ever gonna have fun, at least have it while you drink."

"It was a very roundabout way of making that point," Sousuke said, his expression as blank as ever.

Meanwhile, Kurz looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "Even so... I'm broke, with no future prospects. We crush one group of terrorists and another pops up. No decent chicks. How's a guy supposed to savor his booze, let alone seek adventure?"

The bartender watched Kurz carefully, then squinted and bobbed his head from side to side. Apparently, this was how the old man thought. At last he nodded and said, "Hmm. All right, I'll put a little adventure in your lives."

"Huh? What are you talking about? Hey..." Kurz trailed off as the older man turned away and disappeared back into the kitchen without responding. "Sheesh, what's with that old geezer?" he asked once the man was gone.

"I don't know," said Sousuke. "There's no sign of head trauma as far as I can see..."

The two continued their idle chatting for about an hour after that. But just around the time they'd forgotten their conversation with the bartender and were about to leave...

The old man came back, dragging his leg. "Fool," he said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Where do you think?" Kurz replied. "The barracks. Thanks for the drinks."

“Fool. Don’t go yet.”

“Darn it. What’s with all the verbal abuse? Are you a driving instructor or something?”

As the two stood up, the bartender held out his wrinkled right hand, a roll of old parchment clenched tight in it. “Hang on, kid. *This* is adventure.”

“What the heck?” Kurz scowled, and the old man grinned.

“It’s a map to a treasure hidden here on Merida Island,” said the bartender. “A memento from Captain Amigo, a 17th century pirate.”

Kurz and Sousuke stood there silently for a while. At last, they realized he was serious, and both whispered simultaneously, “Should we call a medic?”

The next morning, Kurz was in full gripe mode. “‘Amigo’... ridiculous. Sounds more like a luchador to me. It’s way beyond fishy...”

Sousuke nodded. Then he said, “He sounds like an extremely weak pirate. Even if he existed, I wouldn’t expect him to be capable of much plunder.”

“Yeah, and even if he buried a treasure chest, he’d probably just fill it with mementos from his friends, like some graduation time capsule.”

“Yeah. One way or another,” Sousuke speculated, “it can’t be anything worthwhile.”

“That old man is crazy,” Kurz said. “It’s almost the 21st century. Pirate treasure? Who’s gonna buy a scam like that?”

“If that’s what you think...” said Sousuke, coming to a stop. “Then what are we doing here?”

They were in the jungle area of Merida Island, about three kilometers from Mithril’s underground base. This particular patch was used as a training ground for recon missions. Sousuke and Kurz were dressed in fatigues, jungle boots, and bush hats, as well as a variety of knives and travel equipment. There were no enemies here, so revolvers were the only weapons they were carrying. Trees as tall as four-story buildings stood around them, swallowing up the sky. Birds sang nearby and sunlight dappled the ground below. On a nearby tree trunk rested what looked like a large species of moth.

“Ah... think of it like a picnic,” Kurz responded, holding up the map in one hand.

This outing was indeed like a picnic for the two of them, but if they hadn’t been as skilled at jungle recon as they were, they’d have been lost and dead of exposure in no time. There were no roads here, and vision was poor. The island had been mostly uninhabited since ancient times, making it one of the Earth’s remaining untouched treasures.

“Besides, there’s a chance it might really exist,” Kurz insisted.

“There’s not even a chance,” Sousuke disagreed. “It’s a waste of time.”

“So what if it is? We’ve got nothing better to do today. You just need to be back by Monday, right?”

“True, but...” Sousuke just didn’t like it. He’d been thinking of taking the opportunity to head out to the cape near the base and go fishing in the ocean for the first time in a while. The M9s under maintenance had run into new trouble—the electronic weaponry this time—so the practice had been canceled once again.

Seeing Sousuke’s attitude, Kurz launched into a passionate speech. “Look, what if? What if, by some chance, there’s really something worth some cash here? I think that’d feel really great.”

“Really?”

“Doesn’t have to be a fortune,” Kurz continued. “Doesn’t need to put me in the lap of luxury. Just enough to treat myself to a nice dinner after I sell it to a pawn shop, you feel me? Even if there’s no treasure, it’s not that big a deal. It’s not about the payout, it’s about the journey. Just like that fishing thing you like so much.”

“Fishing?”

“Yeah. Besides, the old man kinda had a point. The spirit of adventure, that’s what this is about. Even in a nasty line of work like ours, it’s nice to get in a little fantasy every now and again,” said Kurz. “Right?”

“Hmm...” Sousuke didn’t understand the ‘spirit of adventure,’ but he did understand the comparison to fishing. Rather than dangling a line into the waves, he was walking around in the jungle. If he got lucky, his prize was a pirate treasure rather than a fish. It made sense. “But do you think that old map is really reliable?” he asked.

“Hmm? Probably,” said Kurz. “I mean, it’s marked and everything...”

“Let me see.” Sousuke took the parchment and carefully compared it against the most recent map of the island made by Mithril.

Captain Amigo’s map was highly imprecise, and only caught the rough shape of the local coastline and mountains. There was a picture of a spouting whale playing with a sea serpent in the ocean area, which made it seem even more dicey. It marked the treasure on the southeast of the island, with notable rivers and rocks marked around it. There were also notes in old Spanish written here and there.

Sousuke only knew very basic conversational Spanish, so couldn't read most of them, but... "'Señorita Mountain'?" he breathed incredulously. It had to be a joke. Wasn't it possible the map's author wasn't really a 17th century Spaniard, but just a really stupid Japanese person?

"Oh, that mountain's probably the bombing range in D3," Kurz speculated. "The low mountain on the west side."

"That's not the issue," Sousuke told him. "What I mean is, is the map trustworthy?"

"Huh? Hang on, hand it over..." Kurz snatched the map back and poked it with his finger as he explained. "Listen, the map might be shoddy, but the points it marks more or less line up. Look, there's a river that runs from E8 to E9. Even if it's moved a little in a couple hundred years, there's only one river in this area. And here at F8, there's a low cliff; there's one on Amigo's map, too. And on its east face, this rock..." When his explanation was finished, Kurz rolled up the map. "And that's it, basically. There's a rock covering the entrance to the cave where the treasure is hidden. And once we get there, we can check it out for ourselves."

Sousuke remained skeptical. "It's the authenticity of the map that I'm questioning, though."

"You think the old man cooked it up himself? But the map really is that old," said Kurz, waving the brittle old parchment around carelessly.

"Hmm..."

"Got it? Okay, then let's get going." Without waiting for a response, Kurz continued through the jungle, hacking away with his machete.

We're not going to find the features on the map that easily, thought Sousuke, following after him. But land navigation was a fundamental skill for special forces, and there was nothing impenetrable about untracked land in the face of skills like theirs. It was just your average rainforest.

Still, their trip wasn't without incident. There was a roll down a slope, an accidental trek into a swamp, and an attack by giant bees. Once, a large wild pig leaped out of the brush and almost plowed right into them. "Fweee!" it squealed.

"Gwah!" They both shouted, leaping out of its way.

The pig kept on running, but... *Blam!* Sousuke shot it with his revolver. The black pig—more like a boar, actually—let out a high-pitched squeal, trembled, then died.

“You didn’t hafta kill it,” Kurz said.

“You didn’t see the message from HQ?” Sousuke replied as he grabbed the dead animal by the shoulders. “If you find a pig on the grounds, eliminate it or capture it if possible. It’s posted on the message board.”

“But why?”

“Ecosystem preservation,” Sousuke explained. “These pigs are an invasive species, brought here by Europeans ages ago. They’ll dig up tree roots and damage the forests in search of insects. Then when trees die, water pools in their hollows and becomes breeding grounds for mosquitoes, which spread malaria. And malaria kills off the native wildlife,” he finished smoothly.

“When did mercenaries become worried about ecology?” Kurz wondered.

“I suspect they’re just trying to preserve our practice grounds.”

“I guess. Still, I feel kinda sorry for the pig,” said Kurz, nudging the dead beast with his foot.

“We’re not trying to eliminate them. Just thinning their numbers as much as we can.”

“Hmm... Maybe we’ll make a lunch out of it,” Kurz suggested. “Feels wrong to just leave it here.”

“I suppose,” agreed Sousuke. They quickly exsanguinated the pig. Then they prepped it, roasted it, and ate it, taking the leftover meat with them afterwards. Such skill and steely nerves were a necessity for soldiers like them, and the pig ended up being rather tasty.

Despite having low expectations, they found their destination quite easily. On the southeast of the island, there was a low cliff in the middle of the forest. Beside it flowed a river, and at the base of the cliff sat a large rock seven meters in diameter.

“That’s it. It’s under that rock,” Kurz said, looking between the map and the rock.

“Can it really be that easy?” Sousuke wondered.

“It’s what Amigo says; there’s a cave behind that rock. And a treasure chest in the cave...” Kurz looked at the boulder and paused. If the map was correct, there was a long, natural tunnel in the cliff that the large rock was blocking. “So,” he wondered, “how the heck are we supposed to move the

thing?”

“I had the same question,” said Sousuke.

“I see. So, finding it isn’t a puzzle; it’s a simple test of strength.”

“I wonder if he pushed the rock from the top of the cliff to block it,” Sousuke mused. The rock was as big as a civilian house. The two walked around it a while to investigate, but saw no room at all to slip inside.

“Geh... Explosives, maybe? I’m not seeing another way to do it.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sousuke replied as he felt the side of the cliff the boulder rested against.

“How come?”

“The makeup of the cliff is more fragile than you’d expect,” he explained. “We can set up enough explosives to remove the rock, but the force of the explosion might cave in the tunnel beyond.”

“Aha, right.” Sousuke was more knowledgeable than Kurz about the use of explosives, so he accepted his friend’s opinion. But that caused him to frown further. “What to do?” Kurz asked again. “Borrow a bulldozer? Nah, we’d never get it up the mountain...”

“A helicopter could carry it off.”

“Nah, I don’t wanna be owing the pilots any favors,” Kurz said. “Besides, they’d just laugh. No question.”

“Then I suppose we’ll have to give up,” said Sousuke.

Kurz stood a moment in silence, and then, “Ah, dammit!” he shouted, and kicked the big rock with his boot. Apparently unsatisfied with the one, he kicked it a few more times. But the rock remained unmoved.

Sousuke frowned at the sight of his friend’s frustration. “Why are you so upset? You’re the one who said it was about the journey, not the payout.”

“Oh, shut up! It’s the anticlimax that bugs me! In a treasure hunt, there’s gotta be... you know, something *dramatic*! Some hostile locals trying to kill you, a romance with a mysterious beautiful woman! Something!” The island was uninhabited, so there were pigs, but no locals. There *was* a mysterious beautiful woman on the island, but she was busy doing work as a command officer in the base.

“Is that true?” Sousuke asked.

“Yes. If the whole damn story turns out to be, ‘We headed out past the practice grounds, shot a pig and ate it. Oh, the treasure? We couldn’t find it,’ it’s a violation of my personal aesthetics!” Kurz seethed, raising his

hands to the sky and flexing his fingers. “It’s against the spirit of adventure!”

“This ‘spirit of adventure’ thing again... I really don’t understand it,” said Sousuke, folding his arms.

Kurz stood there for a while, his shoulders heaving. Then he said, “Tch... Ah, well. Enough dreaming. The world’s just not designed that way. Starting tomorrow, it’s back to stupid training and pointless battles. And I’ll keep paying back my debts and probably die in some stupid— eh?” Suddenly his eyes opened wide, as if he’d just thought of something.

“What is it?” Sousuke asked.

“What am I, stupid? Yeah, yeah... Hahaha! What was I thinking? It was right there in front of me... how big of a dunce am I?”

“Really? What is it?”

“Shut up, dunce number two. We’re heading back to base!” And with that, Kurz spun around and strode away.

The two returned covered in mud around evening. They dropped their things and the leftover pork off at the barracks, then headed for the base’s 12th hangar. They ran into Mao on the way, but didn’t tell her about the treasure of Captain Amigo.

“We just went pig-hunting,” Kurz said.

“Yes,” Sousuke agreed. “Pig-hunting.”

“Uh-huh... Really?” Mao frowned at them disbelievingly, but didn’t pry any further. She was clearly too distracted by training schedule delays and maintenance issues to worry about anything else.

They walked down the bare concrete hall for a while before entering an empty hangar. There they found six giant gray arm slaves, three lined up against each wall, each one eight meters tall. These were extremely maneuverable modern land-based weapons, capable of manipulating armaments of various sizes. They were kneeling on the floor, heads hanging down and motionless.

This particular model was known as the M6 Bushnell. It was an older model than the M9 Gernsback that Sousuke and Kurz frequently used on missions. Their specs were worse than the M9s, but they were still the main arm slaves employed by most Western countries’ armies in a wide variety of forms. They had a stocky silhouette, like a person wearing a heavy down

vest, and thick thighs and upper arms. Nicks and cuts lined the arcs of their armor.

“Heh heh. Horsepower like this can handle it, easy.” Kurz folded his arms and looked up at the closest machine.

“Are you sure it’s all right to use them without permission?” Sousuke asked gravely. “They may be old, but they still run ten million dollars apiece.”

“Seriously, it’s fine. They’re obsolete and gathering dust. If anyone asks later, we’ll just say we were checking the 2nd generation AS functionalities.”

“But—”

“We’re just borrowing it,” said Kurz, cutting him off. “We’ll wash it off and return it, it’ll be no problem.”

“Hmm...” said Sousuke.

“Don’t you wanna see what the treasure is too?” By now, Kurz was clearly convinced that there really was a treasure behind that huge rock.

Territory it had taken them three hours to cover on foot was done in thirty minutes with an AS as the heavy, powerful footsteps and gas turbine engine roared through the jungle. Piloting the M6 Bushnell, Sousuke pushed effortlessly through the underbrush, traversing mountains and ravines with Kurz in hand before arriving at the base of the cliff. M6s were definitely more maneuverable than humans, if not as good as the M9s.

The sun was well past set by the time they arrived at the base of the cliff. The powerful floodlights on the M6’s shoulder and head illuminated the rock’s unmoving visage, which seemed to proclaim, *“Hah, you silly tin can. Just try and move me.”*

Kurz leaped down off the M6’s hand and said, “Hop to it, Sagara-kun.”

“Stand back,” Sousuke told him via the machine’s external speakers. Then he maneuvered the M6 around to the boulder’s right side, pressing against it to push. The rock was a little shorter than the M6, but it had to weigh fifty or sixty tons, while the arm slave weighed only eleven. Put in human terms, it was like trying to move a large, braked motorcycle through force alone.

“Here I go,” said Sousuke, revving up the M6’s engine. Its turbines began to whir as exhaust billowed out the back. The tremendous electricity

produced by the generator imbued its muscles, made from a special memory plastic, with power. The boulder suddenly trembled as pebbles and moss began to fall from its surface.

“Yes!” Kurz cheered. “Keep going! Do it!”

The M6’s feet planted hard against the ground as Sousuke adjusted its footing and pushed harder against the boulder. The armor and frame began to creak as they stiffened. The large rock was partly sunken into the dirt and seemed unlikely to move, but...

“Ah...”

The AS’s power was truly incredible. The rock began to tilt at last, then slid along the ground a few dozen centimeters. Finally, as if giving up the ghost, it fell away from the M6 with a roar. Dust flew through the air and smoke billowed around them.

“We did it!”

“Look, Kurz,” said Sousuke. As the dust began to settle, the M6’s floodlights revealed the inside of the great hole.

“Wow, it’s really there!” said Kurz.

The cave was about five meters tall. Small pebbles fell from the ceiling, followed occasionally by a rock the size of a fist. Perhaps the cliff’s foundation had been weakened by the boulder’s removal. “It could come down at any time,” Sousuke observed. “It’s dangerous.”

“We came this far,” Kurz protested. “We can’t go back without exploring.”

“Should I at least use the AS to prop it up?”

“Good idea. You do that.”

Sousuke stooped the M6 over and entered the cave, positioning it so that its back supported the ceiling like a prop. He locked the joints into place, opened the cockpit hatch, and got down out of the machine.

The pitch black cave had a gradual slope to it, and the two friends walked further inward, maglites in hand. The tunnel proved to be surprisingly short, and they reached the dead end about fifty meters in. There they found a large pool of water, and beyond it, atop a rock... a rusty treasure chest silently asserted itself.

“Ohh,” said Kurz. “Easy to find.”

“Is it okay for it to be this easy? It doesn’t even feel like we’ve worked for it,” said Sousuke, sweat rising on his forehead.

“I guess he was a really considerate pirate.”

“Or maybe the pirate stuff isn’t true, and the bartender rigged this up himself?”

“It all seems a little intricate for a joke,” Kurz said. While keeping an eye out for traps, they splashed through the water and arrived at the chest, where they used a gun to bash in the lock and opened the lid. “Now, let’s see what we’ve got here...”

“Probably rotten old documents and pepper bottles,” Sousuke predicted.

“Or embarrassing love letters he sent to girls he’d fallen for.”

“It won’t be worthwhile either way.”

“Heh heh... Anyway, let’s find out,” said Kurz, opening the lid. The maglite’s rays made the reality of the treasure clear to see... and in that instant, they both fell silent.

In a sense, neither of them could have predicted it. It just hadn’t seemed possible. The contents of the chest were so far from their expectations that it took them a few minutes to grasp it. Inside the treasure chest...

“Hey.”

...was *treasure*: sparkling gold coins; finely cut jewels; dazzling daggers, mounted with diamonds; intricately embossed silverware. Kurz grabbed a gold bar with trembling hands. It was real, there was no doubt about it. “Hey... This is more than just a couple million dollars,” he said in sheer disbelief. There was no excitement in his voice. It was too overwhelming for him to process right away. “Captain Amigo. Who the heck was this guy?”

“The world is full of mysteries,” Sousuke said, his face pale.

Their first hurdle would be to get the chest out of the cave. The ceiling was fragile and could come down at any time, yet they worked together to bring their haul, tottering step by tottering step, back to the entrance.

With each step they took, the reality of their situation seeped in more and more, but it didn’t elicit a desire to jump for joy right away. First, there was confusion. Then, little by little, hope and possibility began to blossom inside of them.

“This is crazy, man,” said Kurz. “We’re rich, y’know?”

“It does appear that way... This is likely ten million dollars,” Sousuke agreed.

“We’ll split it. Five million apiece. No, we’d better give the old man a cut, too...” Kurz was beginning to sound excited after all.

Meanwhile, Sousuke looked thoughtful. “I can’t think of how to use my share,” he said.

“Are you nuts? Buy yourself a fancy yacht and a summer home!” Kurz exclaimed. “Go fishing every day for fun! Best of all, we can bid this line of work goodbye!”

“I have no interest in yachts or summer homes, but I do like the thought of fishing.” As he said that, Sousuke found himself imagining the scene: he sat on a yacht, silently fishing. The peaceful sea below. The blue sky above. For some reason, Chidori Kaname was on the yacht with him, grilling up the fish he caught. “Not bad,” he sighed happily.

“You’re damn straight it’s not bad! It’s *awesome*!” Kurz’s voice was finally brimming over with delight. “I’ve been through a whole lot in my life. I think it was all saving up karma for this. I thought there was no God in this world... but I was wrong. There totally is!”

“You may be right,” Sousuke agreed genuinely.

Just then, as they arrived at the cave’s midpoint, a stone fell with a bang just two meters to their right! It was about the size of a person’s head. Another fell behind them, and then before them, too. More pebbles than before were showering down from above.

“It’s coming down,” Sousuke yelled.

“Crap!” said Kurz, beginning to panic.

They headed for the exit, the heavy treasure chest wavering between them, but the cave was beginning to come down in force. There was a sound like an earthquake, and a shower of dust fell behind them. If they ran as fast as they could, they might just make it out alive. But with a burden like this...

“We have to drop it,” Sousuke shouted. “It’s too dangerous!”

“Are you nuts?!” Kurz exclaimed.

“Which is more valuable, money or your life?”

“Both! Now, hurry!”

Sousuke considered dropping the chest and running off on his own, but the sight of his friend’s expression gave him pause: Kurz might really be willing to die with the treasure. It was extremely dangerous to keep it, but maybe, if they hurried...

The rocks kept coming down, and progress was achingly slow. Sousuke felt like his fingers on the treasure chest would tear off.

“Almost there!” Kurz shouted. Then, with nearly superhuman spontaneous power, they leaped up the slope as a pair, passing through the M6’s legs and out of the cave.

“Geh!” they coughed. Moments later, there was a roar behind them as the cave collapsed in a shower of dust, rocks and boulders. They’d made it, but just barely.

Kurz and Sousuke made it pretty far away from the cliff before they finally felt safe enough to stop.

“Whew... that was close,” Kurz panted. “I was sure I was a goner.”

“And you almost took me with you!” said Sousuke, who was covered in sweat.

Kurz laughed as he sat down on the treasure chest. “Hey, don’t be so mad. We got the treasure out safe and sound. All that matters is the payout!”

“That’s the opposite of what you said this morning...”

“Don’t sweat it. The point is, we’re rich now. There’s gotta be at least ten million dollars here. Think about that, man!”

“Ten million dollars...” The power of that number sent a new tremble through Sousuke’s body. He felt like, at last, the gears of his life could begin turning in a new direction. A completely new life was within his grasp.

“First, we’ve gotta figure out how to turn this into spending money,” said Kurz. “We can do that once we get back to the base.”

“Right... ah?”

Just then, they realized it:

The M6 Bushnell they’d arrived in was currently buried by hundreds of tons of rocks at the cave’s entrance. Its arms and legs were twisted at bizarre angles. From its slightly exposed torso, they could see white smoke beginning to rise...

“Ah...”

And then it burst into flames and exploded into pieces, throwing dust everywhere. The red fire burned brightly in the dark jungle while the two just stood there, mouths agape. After a while, Kurz whispered. “How much... did you say an M6 costs again?”

“Roughly... ten million dollars.”

●

▼Income
Captain Amigo’s Treasure / 10.31 million dollars (Mithril Estimate)
▼Expenditure
M6A2 Bushnell / 10.31 million dollars (Mithril Invoice)

●

“Biggest load of crap I ever heard.” They were once again in the pub on the base. Kurz was resting his head on the bar, a cheap scotch in his hand. “They confiscated all of it,” he moaned. “Which means a damn pirate treasure can’t buy more than a single damn last-generation AS. Dreams and adventure ain’t worth jack shit. This *sucks*.”

“The estimate they gave was the result of headquarters being generous. We should be grateful they took mercy on us,” said Sousuke, grape juice in hand.

“Gotta say, they’re probably embarrassed about learning there was a treasure like that in their own backyard... I’d be more embarrassed than happy,” Kurz said mournfully. “We’re all a bunch of dunces.”

“Normally we’d be sent to the detention barracks. I’m glad the colonel took our side.”

“Hmm... She’s a good kid. She’d be even better if she discounted that M6 a little and gave us the difference.”

“That would be asking too much,” opined Sousuke, and the conversation stalled there as a black mood overtook them. Then the bartender approached, dragging his leg.

“I heard everything, kids. Sounds like you had a pretty fun time,” the old man said in his husky voice, a smile on his red face.

“Fun? Yeah, right,” Kurz scorned. “It was all a wash!”

“Fool. Just be glad you came back alive and well.” With that, the old man poured bourbon into a shot glass. Kurz just snorted and turned away, but Sousuke raised his hand.

“But, sir... Did you know the map was genuine?”

“Nah,” said the bartender. “That’s why I didn’t look for it myself.”

They both stared at him silently.

“I won that map from an old war buddy in poker,” he explained. “Apparently it was copied from some other map in the 19th century, and the name ‘Captain Amigo’ was made up.”

“But the treasure really existed.”

“I was surprised by that, too. It’s a mystery, all right. A real mystery,” the old man said in amusement as he downed his bourbon. “Listen, you two. This world is full of the irrational and the mysterious. Some of your experiences will be tougher than others. You’ll have laughs and tears and anger, all of a piece. Think about it that way and you’ll feel better. Right?”

“Easy for you to say,” Kurz grumbled.

The bartender didn’t respond, and just dropped two gold coins in front of them. They made a pleasant clinking sound as they rolled along the counter. It was part of the treasure they’d found in the cave.

Sousuke and Kurz just stared. “Isn’t this...?”

“That commanding officer of yours. You know, the Russian? I asked him, and he let me have three coins: one’s for me, the other two are for you fellas.” The old man waved his own coin in the air. “Take ’em. Think of it as a piece of the spirit of adventure. Keep ’em in your pocket and they’ll give you an unseen power—the proof that you lived and laughed. And some day, when you’re lost on the road with nowhere to go, those coins’ll be your guidepost.”

“Hahh...” Kurz sighed.

“You get it? Ah, of course you don’t. But take ’em anyway.”

Each of the two young soldiers picked up his coin and stared at it, as if he were sizing up a strange food item he’d encountered for the first time.

“We’ll take them. Thank you,” Sousuke said with a genuine nod.

“Yeah... not a bad memento for that stupid waste of time,” Kurz smirked. It was a bittersweet smile, but one without regret.

The old man grinned at them in satisfaction, then poured another bourbon into his glass and raised it in their direction. “Now, let’s have a toast,” he said. “To weird old pirates and golden memories.”

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

The three brought their glasses together and enjoyed their drinking party.

Afterword

This book is made up of the *Full Metal Panic!* short stories serialized in *Dragon Magazine* between December 1998 and April 1999, with revisions, plus one original story. I hope you enjoy them as lighthearted comedies.

Regarding this book's title... you've probably already realized, but the numbers in the titles correspond to their volume number. I can do okay with 3 and 4, but things might get sketchy on, like, 6 and 9. By the way, I added the question mark at the end because symbols make a book's title stand out on the shelves. It's a little trick we writers use.

Now let's comment on each story.

"A Hostage of No Compromise"

My big Delinquent Army vs. Protagonist story played out in a pretty anticlimactic way. I guess it makes sense... Sousuke is used to dealing with heavily-armed terrorists, after all. If any of your friends or girlfriends get captured by thugs, please don't try to do what Sousuke does. Just go to the police. Most policemen are nice people. Everyone except for Officer *** of *** Precinct who took me in for a parking violation even though I was innocent. That bastard discriminated against me because I'm not white. Call a lawyer!

(Just kidding. Please don't arrest me.)

"A Lunchtime of Wasted Effort"

I've always been bad at classical Japanese. The idea of figuring things out from context just doesn't work for me. It's the same reason I always hated modern literature tests. I was bad at writing essays, too. When asked to put down what I wanted to be, I would write, "I want to bioengineer a pet-sized panda and mass produce them to make bank." And my teachers wouldn't take me seriously. Though personally, I think it's a great idea...

Anyway, I was awful at language stuff all around. Heh.

“Lethal Weapon of Blasphemy”

To research this story, I traveled around the neighborhood doing some simple info-gathering on shrines. So, you had a big, rough-looking, unshaven guy who’d just pulled an all-nighter wandering around these shrine grounds. I was checking the construction of the buildings, the surrounding foliage, the location of the shrine office and such, and definitely came off as Suspect Shouji Gatou (20s, Unemployed.) When the priest asked me how he could help me, I thought it was a great chance to ask him lots of questions. I asked, “What’s your shrine’s object of worship?” and “How much does it cost?” and “Do you have any anti-theft systems?”

The priest wouldn’t tell me. Instead, he asked for my name and address.

“The War Cry of Overkill”

I actually don’t know much about rugby. Sorry to anyone who plays it seriously. But I do think it’s very aggressive. I’m also sorry to H*ros*e Ryoko fans. But I have to say (omitted). Just kidding. I do think she’s a sincere and nice girl. Please don’t stab me.

“Single-Minded Strike-Out”

This is a story with the love comedy elements on full throttle. (Fumoffu!) I think some people might get it wrong, so make sure that Bonta-kun’s first letter is B, and not P. And definitely not “G.” Be careful there!

“Captain Amigo and Golden Days”

I decided to write a short story comedy about novel characters. For more about Kurz Weber and Mithril, please check out the novels. I think it’s okay to do a story about two guys hanging out once in a while (er, right?). I recommend playing blues in the background while you read it. Personally, I like the sense of weariness that runs through the whole story. Next up is a story about Tessa... maybe?

Anyway. I’d like to thank quite a few people for their help this time around. I’m so grateful. Most thanks to the extremely busy Shikidouji-san.

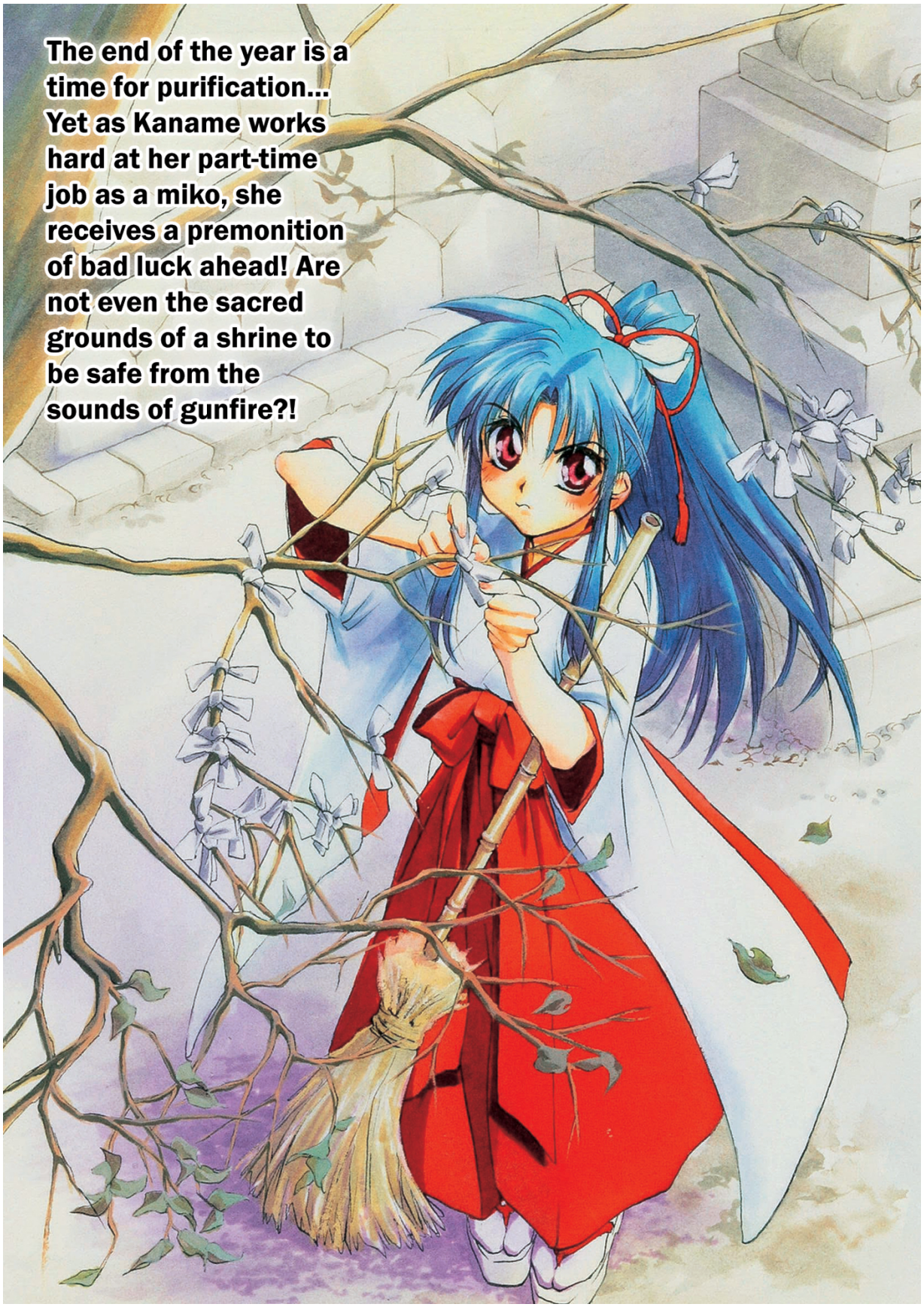
Next volume will be the third novel, and it’ll probably be around autumn

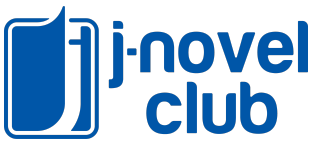
when it’s published. Let’s see each other in *Dragon Magazine* serialization until then.

See you later. Next time, Kaname’s fan will howl once more.

FULL METAL PANIC!
UNFLINCHING TWO-OUT INNING?

“Thanks for before.”
Has Chidori’s heart been stolen by the mysterious mascot Bonta-kun who protected her from yakuza?!


The end of the year is a time for purification... Yet as Kaname works hard at her part-time job as a miko, she receives a premonition of bad luck ahead! Are not even the sacred grounds of a shrine to be safe from the sounds of gunfire?!



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 2
by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis
Edited by Dana Allen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Shouji Gatou, Shikidouji 1999

Vol.2: 1999 HONKI NI NARENAI NISHI MANRUI?
First published in Japan in 1999 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: October 2022

Premium E-Book